

“Dying with a Little Patience”: A Reading of *The Waste Land* in Juxtaposition with Theology

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## Abstract

Literature holds a distinct value in providing an image of human experience that enriches theological discussion and invites substantial reflection on human existence. This thesis follows Paul Fiddes's method of juxtaposition for literature and theology to offer the possibility of an "opening of horizons" between the two disciplines. In following with this method, an exegetical reading of T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land* is juxtaposed with an exposition of three relevant theological themes: devotedness and desire, tragedy, and eschatology. This account of Eliot's poem primarily focusses on the image of living death that Eliot develops through a description of the unintelligibility of tragedy, and the breakdown of the self that is the consequence of this state of death in life. The poem raises a question of the possibility of restoration in light of this experience of tragic suffering. Theological accounts of desire, tragedy, and eschatology, particularly the work of Sarah Coakley, Donald MacKinnon, and Fiddes, respectively, elicit responses in terms of the theological horizons that Eliot's depictions of human experience raise. The study of literature and theology is invaluable in creating a theological landscape that engages with the mediating contribution of representations of human experience.

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## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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# 1 Introduction

Literature holds a distinct value in opening horizons of human experience to invite theological reflection on humanity and the human relationship with the divine. The ability of literature to explicate human experience tempers, challenges, and enriches theological accounts of human existence. This thesis utilises Paul Fiddes's method for literature and theology to juxtapose an exegetical reading of T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land* with an exposition of three theological themes that arise from Eliot's description of human experience: self-negation and desire, tragedy, and eschatology.

The first chapter of this thesis gives an overview of the discipline of literature and theology beginning with insights into a historical approach to mimetic literature in the Christian tradition, before moving onto a discussion of the contemporary academic landscape. A variety of approaches to theological reading of literature have arisen in recent decades and the literature review surveys the field to position this study within the context of Fiddes's juxtaposition method which seeks to maintain the integrity of literature when it is read theologically.

Part 1 of the thesis is an exegetical reading of *The Waste Land* from a literary standpoint. As a close reading of Eliot's work, this exegesis takes seriously the integrity of Eliot's poem as a complete text that depicts a view of human experience as seen by the author. Eliot's various motifs and intertextual allusions combine to create a poem that presents an image of living death in the wake of tragic suffering. The representation of the unintelligibility of this suffering raises the issue of restoration and Eliot's open-ended questions as to whether the waste land can be restored.

The second part of the thesis explores three theological horizons that Eliot's poem opens up on human experience. In chapter five, Eliot's imagery of the fragmented self raises the idea of sin as self-negation, that is central to feminist theologian's accounts of sin, and is brought into conversation with Sarah Coakley's discussion of desire. In chapter six, the tragic suffering described by the poem is discussed in relation to Donald MacKinnon's tragic

theology. In response to images of tragic suffering, Karen Kilby's apophaticism offers a constructive alternative to the either the hopelessness of overly tragic accounts of suffering, a potential trap for MacKinnon, and the excessive knowingness in the work of Thomas Weinandy. Finally, in chapter seven, the question of restoration from the end of the poem is discussed in light of Fiddes's eschatological account of the openness of God. The reading of Eliot's poem in relation to these three fields opens horizons on human experience and offers possibilities for theological reflection. The thesis concludes with the findings and fruits of the juxtaposition of Eliot's *Waste Land* with theological understandings of self, suffering, and hope.

## **1.1 Literature Review**

The discipline of literature and theology has become a distinct field in the last century, largely due to the rise of literary criticism as a field of study. This chapter provides an overview of approaches to the reading of literature in relation to theology in order to develop a methodology which will guide the rest of the thesis. Christianity has a complex history in relation to literature, especially when considering works that come from outside of a Christian perspective. The first section of the literature review provides a brief overview of the tensions inherent to historic Christian engagements with literature, often rooted in the Greek philosophical tradition, and some representative historic methodologies used to engage literature and theology. Following that, this chapter overviews the contemporary scholarly landscape within the field of literature and theology and emphasises Fiddes's juxtaposition method as the method deployed in this thesis. This literature review situates the method of the thesis within the methods of theology and literature, as well as contemporary interdisciplinary practices.



### 1.1.1 Historical Perspectives

Plato's view of literature stands out within Ancient Greek philosophical perspectives as widely influential for Christian views on the morality of fiction and the place it has in the lives of believers. Often viewed as contradictory to other major Greek philosophers, like Aristotle, Plato is suspicious about literature, and excludes poets from his idyllic Republic due to the way that the imitative function of imaginative literature has the power to deceive and give poor moral teaching.<sup>1</sup> In Book X of his *Republic* Plato suggests that "in the soul of man, as we maintain, the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less," and states that the poet is "a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth."<sup>2</sup> Consistent with Plato's theory of the forms, the mimetic task of the artist, and poet, is doubly removed from the truth. The gods create the form, the makers create a shadow of it, and the artists create a shadow of the shadow.<sup>3</sup> Poetry is, in Plato's mind, too far removed from reality to be able to speak truth. However, part of Plato's argument details the didactic nature of literature which has usefulness if it contributes morally to society. He equates didactic poetry with philosophy in the *Laws* in which he accepts the value of didactic discourse, likely due to its dissimilarity with mimetic poetry.<sup>4</sup> The tension raised by Plato between mimetic and didactic literature is echoed by Christian scholars who caution against literature that they do not see providing good moral teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's *Poetics*, written c. 335BCE, details his literary theory and establishes poetry as independent from philosophy, with particular focus on art as mimesis. Unlike Plato, Aristotle is not overtly concerned about the moral influence of this poetry, however much of the detail of this work is still widely debated. See Leland Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Tom Butler-Bowdon (Chichester: Capstone, 2012), 370.

<sup>3</sup> Morriss Henry Partee, "Plato's Banishment of Poetry," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29 (1970): 209-222, 217.

<sup>4</sup> Partee, "Plato's Banishment of Poetry," 215.

One of the early Christian voices from this perspective is Saint Augustine who, in *The City of God*, praises Plato for his exclusion of poets “as the enemies of truth.”<sup>5</sup> In agreement with Plato, Augustine critiques the Roman poets for their falsehood and the blasphemous depictions of their deities which mislead their audiences.<sup>6</sup> Roman poetry is connected to pagan practices in drama, and Augustine, in both *The City of God* and *Confessions*, admonishes Christian involvement with this form of literature.<sup>7</sup> Augustine’s argument around literature is further developed in his *Confessions*, which utilises Plato’s allegory of the cave to develop an ontological critique of theatre as a medium that is a “mere image and thus removed from Being itself.”<sup>8</sup> In Book III, Augustine describes his experiences with theatre and literature, and argues that this writing is “loaded with dazzling fantasies, illusions with which the eye deceives the mind.”<sup>9</sup> Literature is, in Augustine’s view, ontologically mimetic which leads to a moralistic critique as the artform’s falsehood contributes to an inauthentically impassioned response.<sup>10</sup> This early classification of the danger of mimetic literature, namely literature that depicts the human experience without didactic comment, is echoed by later scholars who likewise suggest that the value of literature to Christianity is in what can be taught rather than as an expression of humanity.<sup>11</sup>

However, Augustine’s view of literature as didactic does not preclude fiction from having any value within Christianity, and further investigation in his work suggests that he maintains the possibility of poetry contributing to Christian doctrine. James K. A. Smith questions the traditional reading of Augustine’s argument on literature which focuses on his negativity, and instead argues for a “Christian ... Augustinian aesthetic grounded in a

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972), 63.

<sup>6</sup> James K. A. Smith, “Staging the Incarnation: Revisioning Augustine’s Critique of Theatre,” *Literature and Theology* 15 (2001): 123-139, 126.

<sup>7</sup> Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 70.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, “Staging the Incarnation,” 126.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Middlesex: Penguin, 1961), 61.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, “Staging the Incarnation,” 127.

<sup>11</sup> Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination*, 15.

creational or incarnational ontology which would affirm a positive role for theatre (and film) in the cultivation of the soul.”<sup>12</sup> Augustine’s *Confessions* is highlighted by R. J. O’Connell as an example of “Augustine’s poetic artistry” that creates contradictions between the theory that Augustine espouses and his practice.<sup>13</sup> The *Confessions* are certainly a mimetic work and scholars have identified potential conflicts between the fear of theatricality that Augustine advocates and the dramatic form of his writing.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the focus on Augustine’s argument around literature leads to an awareness of the dangers of immoral, mimetic drama that has no didactic function. Smith illustrates, through an analysis of the wider corpus of Augustine’s work, that Augustine’s focus on creation, incarnation, and resurrection builds a foundation for a Christian aesthetic which affirms literature that offers sound moral teaching.<sup>15</sup>

Contemporary revisions of analyses of Augustine’s work challenge an overly negative reading of his view on literature, highlighting, like Smith, the nuance between immoral fiction and a Christian aesthetic. Regardless, one legacy of Augustine’s work is to create a Christian perspective which holds the view that the only literature Christians should read is that written by Christians for the sole purpose of bringing glory to God.<sup>16</sup> Leland Ryken argues that Augustine’s suspicions about non-Christian literature are echoed repeatedly throughout the generations that follow, and result in Christian poets and authors creating poetry and prose which aims to promote Christian purposes and morals.<sup>17</sup> The influence of Augustine’s view of literature is shown by Max Harris through various thinkers in the Reformation and their Puritan successors who discuss the “immoral influence of the theater.”<sup>18</sup> As examples, Harris

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, “Staging the Incarnation,” 129.

<sup>13</sup> R. J. O’Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine’s Imagination* (Bronx: Fordham UP, 1994), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, “Staging the Incarnation,” 134.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, “Staging the Incarnation,” 130.

<sup>16</sup> The commentary on literature in this early period, as with Augustine, focusses on the mode of dramatic literature as this was the primary fictional literary output at the time, but their conclusions are applicable to what later develops into the more general field of literature that includes prose and poetry.

<sup>17</sup> Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, *Theater and Incarnation*, 70.

points to thinkers like William Prynne who argue that acting is hypocrisy due to the mimetic nature of performance.<sup>19</sup> Significantly for the history of literary criticism, in 1579 Puritan Stephen Gosson addresses Sir Philip Sidney in *The School of Abuse* to object to poetry due to the same concerns around morality as those raised by Plato and affirmed by Augustine.<sup>20</sup> These critiques of theatre raise the question of whether mimetic fictional literature can make any valuable contribution to Christian faith, and outline an ongoing fear among Christian thinkers that extends Augustine's conservatism.

Yet not all Christian thinkers hold such a negative view of literature. In response to Gosson, Sidney provides an important alternative voice in his *Apology for Poetry* which offers a defence against the sorts of claims made by Plato and others. Poetry is still didactic, in Sidney's view, and contributes to moral teaching, but he claims that this is a value within a Christian aesthetic rather than a disadvantage.<sup>21</sup> The art of poetry is to "imitate both to delight and teach" and to "teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved."<sup>22</sup> Imaginative writing is the best method, Sidney argues, with which to inspire readers towards virtue, as opposed to the non-fiction forms of history or philosophy. He states that "none can both teach and move thereto so much as poesy, then is the conclusion manifest that ink and paper cannot be to a more profitable purpose employed."<sup>23</sup> As opposed to the concerns raised by Gosson, Sidney highlights the value of imaginative writing, even if it is mimetic, for the purpose of both entertainment and moral teaching.<sup>24</sup> Sidney's perspective is not simply a defence of the didactic value of literature, but is also an elucidation of the way that mimetic writing contributes to literature's ability to teach through entertainment. The *Apology* is a

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<sup>19</sup> Harris, *Theater and Incarnation*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 212-251, 218.

<sup>23</sup> Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," 234.

<sup>24</sup> Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination*, 16.

landmark text in the history of Christian literary criticism as it helps to establish a view of literature that asserts its significance as mimetic for both aesthetic and didactic purposes.

In addition to contributions towards a developing Christian aesthetic, Sidney's argument for the value of poetry extends to those authors who are not informed by a Christian perspective. Throughout his *Apology* Sidney refers to the works of numerous ancient and contemporary writers who are not composing Christian verse, such as Aesop, Homer, and Plutarch, and includes their work as defensible against the charges laid by Puritan thinkers like Gosson.<sup>25</sup> One such charge is that poetry is "the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires," or that not all poetry presents sound moral teaching.<sup>26</sup> Sidney argues that one can "not say that poetry abuseth man's wit, but that man's wit abuseth poetry."<sup>27</sup> His claim is that all poetry is intended to be "*eikastikē*" which means that it is "figuring forth good things."<sup>28</sup> Sidney's work in the *Apology* sets a precedent for literature to be read theologically regardless of the religious intention of the author. His focus is on didacticism, yet his argument is as valid for theological teaching as it is for moral instruction. These historical accounts of literature's role within theology help to place the contemporary conversation in order to strengthen the development of a methodology for reading literature and theology. They do so by acknowledging the shift from a view of the value of didacticism to a prioritisation of mimetic literature that presents accounts of human experience for the opening of theological horizons.

### 1.1.2 Contemporary Methodologies

Literature and theology has grown as a distinct discipline in the last fifty years and this development is largely rooted in the growth of literary criticism that began at the start of the

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<sup>25</sup> Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," 234.

<sup>27</sup> Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," 236.

<sup>28</sup> Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," 236.

twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Literary criticism is not a new field, but it has gained greater prominence in the last 150 years due to the secularisation of culture. John Coulson claims that the 1900s saw “the emergence of a secular and plural society no longer founded upon a confessional affirmation of the Christian faith.”<sup>30</sup> Likewise, literary theorist Terry Eagleton points to the “failure of religion” as the reason for the increasing study of English literature, and cites the inaugural speech of Oxford English literature professor George Gordon who claims “England is sick ... and English literature must save it. The churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State.”<sup>31</sup> David Jasper, in his overview of the rise of an interdisciplinary approach to literature and theology, argues that Eagleton’s “death of God” hypothesis in literary criticism provides the context for the development of a practice of studying literature and theology in a society where the two disciplines are distinct.<sup>32</sup> The growth of secular literature, Jasper suggests, creates a disjuncture in the two disciplines that engenders a need for theological engagement with wider forms of literature as the study of literature becomes removed from the study of theology.

Initially the interdisciplinary practice of literature and theology followed the methodology laid out by earlier critics such as Samuel Johnson or Andrew Marvell in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, whose particular focus was on literature developed for the purpose of the church.<sup>33</sup> These scholars view literature as “dependant on the truths of Christian theology,” which means that the way they read literature is primarily framed by the

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<sup>29</sup> David Jasper, “The Study of Literature and Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, eds. Andrew Hass, David Jasper, and Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16-33, 17.

<sup>30</sup> John Coulson, “Religion and Imagination (Relating Religion and Literature) – A Syllabus,” in *Images of Belief in Literature*, ed. David Jasper (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1984), 7-23, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 20.

<sup>32</sup> Jasper, “The Study of Literature and Theology,” 17.

<sup>33</sup> Jasper, “The Study of Literature and Theology,” 17.

doctrinal presuppositions that they bring to the text.<sup>34</sup> Literature is only deemed valuable when it adheres to the theologian's didactic criteria. Eliot and C. S. Lewis participate in this tradition in the mid-twentieth century, as outlined in Eliot's 1935 essay "Religion and Literature." Eliot argues that literary study must be "completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint," and asserts that it is insufficient to read literature through its own standards and instead a theological viewpoint must be employed for literary assessment.<sup>35</sup> In line with the earlier tradition, Eliot's perspective is that the critical lens of Christianity must be brought to literature in order that the text may be critiqued and its value assessed based on the presupposed standards that doctrine creates.<sup>36</sup> This methodology constrains the ability of literature to speak on its own terms and limits the text's expositional power with regards to human experience.

This thesis sets out to provide a theological account juxtaposed to a reading of Eliot's poetry, yet his literary method is inadequate in the context of the wider discipline of literature and theology. Eliot's emphasis on reading from a clear theological standpoint does not do justice to the nuances and textures of poetry, which risk being subsumed by theology's doctrinal presuppositions. This thesis reads Eliot in opposition to the later Eliot's own perspective on interdisciplinary method, and instead reads his poem in light of the way that the field has changed since these assertions were made.

The latter part of the twentieth century saw development in the field of literature and theology in a way that valued the literary modes. In the 1960s, Stanley Romaine Hopper developed the concept of theopoetics as a field of study that used poetic articulations of human experience to contribute to the systematic theologian's understanding of God. Hopper describes the "spiritual significance" of poetry as part of his existentialist perspective, and argues for a form of theological analysis that fits within the postmodern framework of the

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<sup>34</sup> Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology," 17.

<sup>35</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953), 32-43, 32.

<sup>36</sup> Eliot, "Religion and Literature," 33.

1960s and 1970s.<sup>37</sup> This postmodern framework is identified with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and philosophies regarding metanarratives which question the overall significance of binary religious standpoints, and instead affirm an "openness to the other."<sup>38</sup> Derrida's work generates the climate for theological inquiry that, as David Miller states, concerns itself with "strategies of human signification in the absence of fixed and ultimate meanings accessible to knowledge or faith."<sup>39</sup> Within theopoetics, poetry is assigned the power to articulate theological perspectives with an emphasis on an experiential epistemology. This does not mean that all poetry expresses theology, but rather that poetic epistemology is "a formal thinking about the nature of the making of meaning, which subverts the -ology, the nature of the logic, of theology."<sup>40</sup> Theopoeisis develops the concept that literature is the form within which theology can be articulated in terms of existential presumptions. While not a method that this thesis employs, the intention that theopoetics provides regarding the value of literature for theology is significant in informing the method of juxtaposition.

As a way of reading literature in relation to theology, Nathan A. Scott Jr. develops the concept of a "theological horizon" in literature.<sup>41</sup> In his 1985 book *The Poetics of Belief* Scott uses the work of Hopper and Paul Tillich to develop an argument for a religious philosophy which privileges the imagination as a constructive element. Scott's close readings of literary texts employ a methodology which seeks to illuminate human existence by means of the statements made in literature.<sup>42</sup> According to this method, literature is foundational for the construction of religion, an argument Scott makes with reference to twentieth century literature like that of Ernest Hemingway, Samuel Beckett, and Eliot. However, scholars of

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<sup>37</sup> L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), eBook, ch. 1, "Introduction."

<sup>38</sup> Dawne McCance, *Derrida on Religion: Thinker of Différance* (London: Routledge, 2009), 23.

<sup>39</sup> David Miller, "Theopoetry or Theopoetics?" *Cross Currents* 60 (2010): 6-23, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Miller, "Theopoetry or Theopoetics?" 14.

<sup>41</sup> Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology," 19.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel C. Noel, "Nathan Scott and the Nostalgic Fallacy: A Close Reading of Theological Criticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38 (1970): 347-366, 348.



literature and religion critique Scott's method for its treatment of literary texts in terms of the theological presumptions imposed by the reader.<sup>43</sup> In a review of Scott's 1965 edited work *Forms of Extremity in the Modern Novel* literary critic J. Hillis Miller questions "the degree to which the theologian or religious philosopher is justified in taking literature seriously as a testimony to the spiritual condition of a time" due to the dimensional differences between the two disciplines.<sup>44</sup> The significant contribution of Scott's work, as J. Miller maintains, is that there is an innate connection between literature and theology as "metaphysical presuppositions in a work of literature are fundamental and determine its other aspects."<sup>45</sup> Scott's language of a theological horizon in literature helps to frame an interdisciplinary approach to literature that identifies theological aspects of fiction, while maintaining J. Miller's caution against the theologian's doctrinal impositions on the text. Doctrinal presuppositions result in a reading that undermines the dignity of the writing and the author's intentions.

In a different way to Scott, theologian Thomas Altizer also imposes theologically on the literary text as he pays attention primarily to theological and doctrinal issues.<sup>46</sup> His work in the 1960s focusses on William Blake and other mythic authors to develop his "death of God" theology. Altizer views literature as a key part of the development of Christian doctrine rather than a didactic form or a mode to express theology.<sup>47</sup> For example, Altizer credits Blake as the one who "first fully realised the eschatological or apocalyptic identity of Jesus."<sup>48</sup> As Blake is a Christian poet, Altizer's reading of his work does not appear problematic from a literary perspective, yet the use of a similar methodology for reading non-Christian texts results in an imposition of Christian theology where none is to be found. Altizer's analysis of Blake shows that imaginative literature does have a role in advancing theological concepts.

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<sup>43</sup> Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology," 20.

<sup>44</sup> J. Hillis Miller, review of *Forms of Extremity in the Modern Novel*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, *Journal of Religion* 46 (1966): 422, 422.

<sup>45</sup> Miller, review of *Forms of Extremity in the Modern Novel* (ed. Scott), 422.

<sup>46</sup> Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology," 21.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Altizer, "Altizer on Altizer," *Literature and Theology* 15 (2001): 187-194, 189.

<sup>48</sup> Altizer, "Altizer on Altizer," 189.

However, the theological focus necessitated by Altizer's method engages in what William Spanos critiques as the tendency of Christian critics "to appropriate artists who are committed to other than Christian beliefs as Christians or approximate Christians."<sup>49</sup>

Contrary to Altizer, Giles Gunn seeks to reconstitute the relationship between literature and theology in a way that preserves the intent of literary texts. The relationship of literature and theology needs to be "on the plane of the hermeneutical rather than the apologetic, the anthropological rather than the theological, the broadly humanistic rather than the narrowly doctrinal."<sup>50</sup> Gunn situates himself within the work of critics who seek to find a common ground between literature and theology, and proposes that the interrelatedness of the two disciplines is found in their conception from culture.<sup>51</sup> Literature, he argues, uses cultural material heuristically to explore human experience while theology, when focussed in this way, uses culture paradigmatically to establish a picture of reality and how one should relate to the world.<sup>52</sup> The distinctiveness of the two disciplines allows for scholars to study the relationship between them. Gunn's methodology for reading literature, as outlined in his book *The Interpretation of Otherness*, is rooted in his conception of fiction as hypothetical. From this perspective, "literature is neither totally immersed in the world of everyday experience nor completely divorced from it."<sup>53</sup> The nature of imaginary texts is propositional which means that "literature can, by quickening our sense of possibility and complicating our imagination of good and ill, at least help to make us a little more human."<sup>54</sup> Theological readings of literature inform whether or not assent is given to the hypothesis posed by the author.<sup>55</sup> The

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<sup>49</sup> William V. Spanos, "Christian Criticism and the Modern Literary Imagination: Some Caveats," *Christian Scholar* 49 (1966): 236-245, 237.

<sup>50</sup> Giles Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 5.

<sup>51</sup> Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness*, 6.

<sup>53</sup> Giles Gunn, "Introduction," in *Literature and Religion*, ed. Giles Gunn (London: SCM Press, 1971), 1-33, 25.

<sup>54</sup> Gunn, "Introduction," 29.

<sup>55</sup> Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness*, 85.

question posed by Gunn is whether the text is true to the human experience it intends to describe, and whether or not this correlates to undergirding religious principles.<sup>56</sup> Gunn's focus on literature's exposition of human experience and the perspective this provides for theological accounts of humanity contributes to a juxtapositional method of reading literature theologically.

Attention is drawn to the disparity between American and British scholarship in literature and theology by F. W. Dillistone in a lecture in 1982. Dillistone argues that there is a "hesitation, even suspicion in academic circles in this country [England] when attempts have been made to suggest that theology and English literature have much to contribute to one another and to learn from one another."<sup>57</sup> Dillistone's paper is important as it is given as the introduction to the first National Conference on Literature and Religion in Durham. This gathering, Jasper claims, marks a turning point in the formalisation of the study of literature and religion in Britain, and highlights the significant work of Dillistone, Coulson, Jasper, and Ulrich Simon.<sup>58</sup> The central thesis of Dillistone's argument is that theologians cannot ignore the value which literature provides for religious study. He states that "theology should be paying careful attention to literature" given the way that literature contributes to the day to day human experiences which were formerly shaped by religion.<sup>59</sup> In his exposition of literature, Dillistone shows the way that literature can be used to shift "the theological mind from proposition and 'statable message' to a respect for the power of symbol and intuition."<sup>60</sup> Dillistone's argument identifies literature as a mode in which theological truths can be elucidated and developed through the power of imaginative thinking. While his focus is more on the contribution of literary language structures to theology, rather than content, the

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<sup>56</sup> Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology," 21.

<sup>57</sup> F. W. Dillistone, "Introduction," in *Images of Belief in Literature*, ed. David Jasper (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1984), 1-6, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology," 21.

<sup>59</sup> Dillistone, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>60</sup> Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology," 21-22.

importance of Dillistone's proposal to this thesis is in the assertion of the value that close attention to literature provides for theology.

In the same vein as Dillistone, Coulson argues that imaginative readings of literature can guide the frame of theological questioning. In *Religion and Imagination* Coulson emphasises the relationship between imaginative art forms and religion. Coulson draws a distinction between literature which reinforces religious belief and writing that is done in a strict secular context, yet he does not deny the value of "confessional imagination" regardless of the original intent of the text.<sup>61</sup> It is necessary for the theologian, Coulson maintains, not just to read literature but to engage imaginatively with the subject matter raised by the text. Reading literature imaginatively is key to Coulson's methodology of literature and theology wherein he argues that an imaginative reading of texts elucidates the form of questions that theologians can ask of the text and by extension the culture that the text comes from.<sup>62</sup> Through the use of the language of "assent" Coulson asserts the role of the theologian in literature to determine the validity of the claims made by the author.<sup>63</sup> S. T. Coleridge describes reading in terms of a "willing suspension of disbelief," and Coulson's claim is that the role of theology is to determine whether or not to give assent to that suspension.<sup>64</sup> From Coulson's perspective, assent is necessary due to the relationship between religion and imagination and the power of the imaginative to be transcendent.<sup>65</sup> Literature, whether intentionally or not, contributes to the theological understanding of the reader so Coulson believes it is necessary for literature to be read and understood theologically. This view of literature leads to a methodology that begins with an imaginative reading of the texts that does not assume that the literary author's assertions are theologically valid.

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<sup>61</sup> Coulson, "Religion and Imagination," 8.

<sup>62</sup> John Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: In Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology," 22.

<sup>64</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. George Watson (London: Everyman's Library, 1906), 169.

<sup>65</sup> Coulson, "Religion and Imagination," 22.

A common strain in the study of literature and theology is a focus on the art of tragedy and its relationship to Christian doctrine. In contrast to the way that Coulson engages with tragedy in the work of post-Christian authors, Simon predominantly uses the Shakespearean tragedies to elucidate his reflection on literature. Simon suggests there is a correlation between the form of tragic writing and Christianity, stating that “Christianity is tragic because of the Cross, and tragedy becomes Christian through the Resurrection.”<sup>66</sup> Tragedy is a literary form which Simon believes best captures the weight of human existence and expresses the truth of the human condition.<sup>67</sup> With a focus on tragedy Simon’s work ensures that the reality of suffering and loss to the human condition is not ignored, but he maintains that hope, characterised by the resurrection, is a central part of the genre. Simon argues that through this tragic expression of human experience literature has the power to act as a corrective to theology that is removed from the truth of human existence.<sup>68</sup> Methodologically this approach places the onus on literature to relocate theology within human experience and to ground Christian doctrine in the truth of the world. Theological principles are not imposed on texts but are instead challenged by the expressions of existence that literature develops.

Tragedy is also central to Donald MacKinnon’s work in literature and theology. MacKinnon, similarly to Simon, asserts that tragic writing outlines important aspects of the reality of human experience, and as will be explored in chapter six, informs the basis of his theology. In his discussion of the works of William Shakespeare and Sophocles in an essay on atonement, MacKinnon states that “even if we are tempted to write them off as works of imagination, the imagination displayed in them is one powerful in the disclosure of what is; it is not the servant of idealist fantasy in the way in which we must surely judge that the

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<sup>66</sup> Ulrich Simon, *Pity and Terror: Christianity and Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 145.

<sup>67</sup> Ulrich Simon, “Job and Sophocles,” in *Images of Belief in Literature*, ed. David Jasper (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1984), 42-51, 49.

<sup>68</sup> Jasper, “The Study of Literature and Theology,” 22.

comfortable musings of theologians and metaphysicians often are.”<sup>69</sup> MacKinnon uses tragic literature’s account of human experience as a grounding point for theology. Literature provides the structure for relating theology to the lived experience of humanity, what MacKinnon terms the “stuff of human history,” which guards against the creation of a systematic theology which is abstracted from the world in which it is written.<sup>70</sup> Simon and MacKinnon’s focus on tragedy as a grounding point for theology leads to the use of literature as a frame for comprehending the tragic realities present in human existence.<sup>71</sup> The benefit of this methodology is that literary texts are used as a corrective to theology which is not grounded in the truth of human experience, in a way that limits the imposition of theological concepts onto literature where they are not intended.

Rowan Williams is an important contemporary scholar in literature and theology, and his claims about the religious imagination are rooted in his perspective on the poetic imagination as re-creation, or mimesis, through immersion in the world.<sup>72</sup> The poet is not accidentally engaging in this act of re-creation, rather it occurs through “an acute awareness of the world not being at home in itself, in a sense of *dislocation*.”<sup>73</sup> Williams highlights the way that literature functions within theology as “a means of not closing down substantial and deeply difficult areas of our human experience.”<sup>74</sup> While he acknowledges that not all writers come to this form from a religious perspective, Williams argues that they follow this path regardless and that all writing displays the process of redemption for humanity, even if it does this through the absence of God rather than the presence.<sup>75</sup> Williams asserts that “human making, seeks to echo, necessarily imperfectly, the character of God’s love as shown in

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<sup>69</sup> Donald MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, eds. George W. Roberts and Donovan E. Smucker (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), 101.

<sup>70</sup> Donald MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology* 5 (London: SCM, 1979), 105.

<sup>71</sup> Jasper, “The Study of Literature and Theology,” 23.

<sup>72</sup> Rowan Williams, “Poetic and Religious Imagination,” *Theology* 80 (1977): 178-187, 181.

<sup>73</sup> Williams, “Poetic and Religious Imagination,” 178.

<sup>74</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>75</sup> Williams, “Poetic and Religious Imagination,” 185.

making and becoming incarnate.”<sup>76</sup> All creatives are therefore implicated in the process of re-creation, and Williams claims that it is the act of creating in and of itself which has implications for the religious imagination. Williams’s work in literature and theology impels an appreciation of the significance that the literary depiction of human experience holds and the way that theology can speak into the questions that literature raises about this experience.<sup>77</sup>

Literature is valuable as art for art’s sake, and Ryken, as a literary scholar primarily, argues that imaginative writing’s usefulness is in the way in which writers present a faithful picture of human experience alongside their own worldview.<sup>78</sup> Ryken suggests that as a contrast to some theological writing imaginative literature encompasses “the entire range of human experience, not simply intellectual facts or fragments of information.”<sup>79</sup> Read from this perspective, literature provides an anthropological perspective to the issues raised by theology. Ryken argues that “even when a work of literature fails to provide Christian answers to the problems of human experience, it clarifies the human issues to which the Christian faith speaks.”<sup>80</sup> Due to the literary work’s exposition of human experience, regardless of the faith perspective of the author, the text can speak to the nature of humanity as a whole and thereby contribute to an anthropological theological perspective. Ryken’s work is primarily interested in literature’s description of human experience and does not develop a methodology that produces constructive theological statements from literary texts. The focus on literary accounts of human experience in Ryken’s work emphasises, particularly given his position as a literary scholar rather than a theologian, the need for literature to be read and interpreted on its own terms before it is brought into theological conversation.

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<sup>76</sup> Cited in Carolyn Kelly, “Re-forming Beauty: Can Theological Sense Accommodate Aesthetic Sensibility?” in *“Tikkun Olam” – To Mend the World: A Confluence of Theology and the Arts*, ed. Jason A. Goroncy (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 61-82, 74.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 3.

<sup>78</sup> Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination*, 102.

<sup>79</sup> Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination*, 24.

<sup>80</sup> Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination*, 28.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Jasper develops a methodology for reading literature and theology which reads literature first as literature rather than a theological text. The standards by which literature can be read are already established and, Jasper argues, must be adhered to in order to provide an ethical reading of the text.<sup>81</sup> The result of “reading literature as literature (and not as simply a vehicle for theology or dogma)” is the development of “a way to perceive more clearly the workings of the divine in creation.”<sup>82</sup> Central to Jasper’s work is an emphasis on reading literature through a literary-critical lens first so that an accurate representation of the author’s perspective on human expression can be established prior to drawing theological suppositions from a text. Jasper claims that a literary text’s depiction of human experience is not simply anthropological but is theological due to the understanding of God engendered by the image of humanity that the author expresses. Any methodology that seeks to read literature theologically must first adhere to the standards that Jasper emphasises in order that the literature is treated appropriately.

Recent work by theologian David Cunningham functions along a similar vein to Ryken’s with an emphasis on literature’s expositional role towards human experience. Cunningham uses the work of philosopher Martha Nussbaum to describe the way that stories “encourage us to acknowledge the full humanity of others: their joys and sorrows, their hopes and aspirations.”<sup>83</sup> Stories help to point to the “ordinary” parts of human life, the experiences and emotions that can only be described well through a narrative or poetic structure.<sup>84</sup> Cunningham uses his theory of literature to develop a method of reading a text theologically in which “acknowledgement and attention” must be given to the issues raised by the literary text so that theological insights can be offered.<sup>85</sup> As it is the literature which points the

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<sup>81</sup> David Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>82</sup> Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion*, 8.

<sup>83</sup> David S. Cunningham, *Reading is Believing: The Christian Faith Through Literature and Film* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>84</sup> Cunningham, *Reading is Believing*, 9.

<sup>85</sup> Cunningham, *Reading is Believing*, 10.



theologian to a vision of humanity, a theological reading of the literary text must first begin with the attention towards to mode of reading that the text requires. Cunningham's methodology contributes to the strand of literature and theology that emphasises primarily the reading of literature according to literary methods in order to then make theological statements.

The work of literary theologian Fiddes is of particular interest in the development of a methodology for this thesis. In his two books on literature and theology Fiddes develops a methodology for reading literature theologically based on the two discipline's "relationship of mutual influence without confusion, where the images and narratives of literature can help the theologian to make doctrinal statements."<sup>86</sup> This interdisciplinary approach is imperative for Fiddes as literature, "since it is concerned with human experience, is occupied with themes that also occupy Christian faith and theology," and therefore contributes to a theological account of human experience.<sup>87</sup> The purpose of reading literature theologically is not to create a synthesis between the two, rather it is so that they "can have a mutual impact upon each other, as there is an 'opening of horizons' between them."<sup>88</sup> Neither the literary or theological mode is privileged, rather they are held side-by-side: the writer's representation of humanity next to the perspective offered by the Christian tradition in order to facilitate a dialogue between the two disciplines.<sup>89</sup>

Fiddes's method requires that the study of literature and theology is pursued in a way that does not limit works of literature to a mine of Christian truth with no regard to the original text or the art form they inhabit. Fiddes describes how "we must beware of denigrating the arts, by treating them as a happy hunting ground for mere 'shadows' of Christian truths," and

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<sup>86</sup> Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 6.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue Between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (London: MacMillan Press, 1991), 33.

<sup>88</sup> Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, 33.

<sup>89</sup> Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, 33.

argues for the way in which literature must be read for what it says on its own terms.<sup>90</sup> The method that Fiddes suggests is one of juxtaposition, where the literature is read well using literary methods, and then, as a result, the contributions that theology can make to the aspects of human existence in the text are elucidated. In *Freedom and Limit*, Fiddes utilises his juxtaposition method to analyse the works of five different authors and isolates key issues raised in each of their writings. He then discusses these issues in terms of the relevant Christian doctrine which pertains to each issue. There is a risk that, because the literary interpretation is followed by the doctrinal perspective, theological interpretation becomes an answer to literature rather than providing a contribution to a mutual “opening of horizons.” Texts are first assessed using a literary critical method and then theology is used to provide answers to the questions the literature raises about human experience. For this reason, it is necessary that theological considerations are given in the context of an ethical reading of literature that assumes the intrinsic value of the author’s statements about human experience.

## 1.2 Juxtaposition as a Method

This thesis utilises Fiddes’s method of juxtaposition for literature and theology to examine *The Waste Land*. A method of juxtaposition firstly holds the integrity of the piece of literature by ensuring that it is read through a literary-critical lens, as emphasised in the works of Jasper and Cunningham. Unlike the suspicion of mimetic literature developed from Platonic perspectives, this thesis asserts the value of the mimesis as the way that literature best elucidates elements of human experience. The exegesis of the literary text is completed prior to, and without consideration of, theological exposition in order that the literature may be read on its own terms. Following this exegesis, elements of human experience that the text raises will be brought into conversation with theological concepts to expand the theological horizon of the concepts the text raises. Juxtaposition allows this thesis to examine the scope of human experience within the relevant theological concepts through the way that Eliot’s poem depicts

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<sup>90</sup> Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, 32.

these human situations. There can be a mutual opening of horizons as the theologian, while not imposing unwarranted theological concepts onto the text, brings an awareness of Christian tradition and ideas that “help to place religious symbol in its context.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, 34.

## Part 1: An Exegetical Reading of *The Waste Land*

Part one of this thesis follows the methodology of juxtaposition to develop an exegetical reading of *The Waste Land*. The reading of the poem is done with consideration for the literary-critical history of the work, and an awareness of the methodological frameworks of literary scholarship. Through his numerous intertextual allusions and extended metaphors, T. S. Eliot depicts a state of living death that is the experience of the waste land's inhabitants in the wake of the fragmentation of meaning caused by the breakdown of society. This chapter will explore the consequences of this experience of living death on the representation of life following suffering and its impact on the self and relationships. The poem also raises the question of the possibility of restoration and this is considered in light of both the desire for stasis and the desire for peace.

## 2 The Poem, its Contents, and Reception

*The Waste Land* was first published in Britain in the October 1922 edition of *The Criterion*, and the US in the November issue of *The Dial*. The 1971 facsimile, published by Valerie Eliot, shows that T. S. Eliot had been writing the poem in various locations for nearly a decade prior to it being published.<sup>92</sup> Rather than being a poem written from one context, *The Waste Land* is a story that encompasses Eliot's personal journey alongside the wider European experience in the 1910s. The complex history of the poem contributes to the multiplicity of critical opinions that it has generated from the moment it was published to the present day. The world changed in the decade during which Eliot wrote his poem and the piece he produced has become, for some, a symbol not only of the change he saw and experienced, but also of the change the world was experiencing.

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<sup>92</sup> Hugh Kenner, "The Urban Apocalypse," in *Eliot in His Time: Essays on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of The Waste Land*, ed. A. Walton Litz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 23-49, 24.

In order to engage with *The Waste Land* it is important to understand the rise of the literary movement of modernism in which the poem is written. Ezra Pound, in a letter before the poem's publication, credits *The Waste Land* as "the justification of the 'movement'" which is broadly described by literary critics as modernism.<sup>93</sup> The publication of Eliot's poem, and its coincidence with James Joyce's *Ulysses* seems, Shari Benstock argues, "to have been the watershed of the modernist movement, a year that directed the flow of literary endeavor in such a way as to insure the ascendancy of a new experimentalism aimed at revealing the hidden recesses of the human consciousness."<sup>94</sup> As an enigmatic moment in the modernist movement, *The Waste Land* embodies a key irony of a movement concerned with the rejection or loss of tradition and desire for newness through the trope of allusion and therefore the inclusion of the past. Eliot's *Waste Land* is key to the modernist movement due to the way in which it captures the aims of the movement both methodologically and thematically.<sup>95</sup>

## 2.1 Contextual Factors and Textual Criticism

*The Waste Land* is seen by some as a central piece in Eliot's pre-conversion poetry. This theory presupposes a stark turn in Eliot's faith which leads to his 1927 baptism and 1928 public declaration of Anglo-Catholic faith.<sup>96</sup> It is difficult to establish the factors which lead to conversion in another's life, but there are elements of Eliot's religious journey which contribute to an understanding of *The Waste Land* and are, therefore, pertinent for this thesis. Barry Spurr investigates the religious turn in Eliot's work, and observes that his relationship with Anglo-Catholicism occurs from an earlier age than other scholars suggest.<sup>97</sup> Rather than

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<sup>93</sup> James E. Miller Jr, *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 155.

<sup>94</sup> Shari Benstock, "1922 and After: The Poetic Landscape of Joyce and Eliot," *The Centennial Review* 20 (1976): 332-350, 332.

<sup>95</sup> Benstock, "1922 and After," 332.

<sup>96</sup> Barry Spurr, "Anglo-Catholicism and the 'Religious Turn' in Eliot's Poetry," *Religion & Literature* 44 (2012): 136-143, 143.

<sup>97</sup> Spurr, "Anglo-Catholicism and the 'Religious Turn' in Eliot's Poetry," 138.

claim that Eliot's baptism is a stark "conversion" experience, Spurr maintains that these events "were the culmination of many years of searching, both within Christianity and well beyond it, including study of Eastern religions such as Buddhism."<sup>98</sup> *The Waste Land* is in this way part of Eliot's search for a "system of belief that would explain and ameliorate his intensifying experience, both personal and universal, of the horror and despair of human existence."<sup>99</sup> However, while hindsight may show *The Waste Land* as part of a journey towards Christianity, making biographical connections in the text requires that these are seen in the light of his searching rather than his later conversion. Care needs to be taken not to read Eliot's later positions into earlier texts.

Eliot constructs *The Waste Land* from fragments of texts which the speaker claims he has "shored against my ruins."<sup>100</sup> Through this use of shored fragments, Eliot is able to construct a new mythology that has particular relevance to the circumstances he confronts in his contemporary society. The innumerable intertextual references and allusions in the poem build Eliot's prophetic vision of post-war Europe, a society that he presents as disconnected and decaying. Hugh Kenner describes the way that the poem is modelled after post-war reconstruction: "cities are built out of previous cities, as *The Waste Land* is built out of the remains of older poems."<sup>101</sup> Each of the allusions that Eliot uses brings the older text forward into the world of his poem to construct a mosaic of meaning. The development of an exegetical reading of the poem requires that these fragments are treated in terms of the rhizomatic nature

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<sup>98</sup> Spurr, "Anglo-Catholicism and the 'Religious Turn' in Eliot's Poetry," 137.

<sup>99</sup> Spurr, "Anglo-Catholicism and the 'Religious Turn' in Eliot's Poetry," 137.

<sup>100</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), l. 430.

<sup>101</sup> Hugh Kenner, "The Death of Europe," in *T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land: Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 9-32, 15.

of literary allusions; to uphold the relevance of the original context of the allusion and to assess the impact of that origin within the framework of the poem.<sup>102</sup>

Prior to the publication of *The Waste Land* in book form, Eliot added a series of notes on the poem that contains references to other texts, and comments on sections of his writing.<sup>103</sup> These notes were not published in *The Criterion*'s earlier version of the poem and for this reason some scholars treat them as secondary to Eliot's intended text. Yet others, such as A. Walton Litz, maintain that the notes should be viewed as a source in a way that does not overpower the text of the poem.<sup>104</sup> While Eliot's inclusion of the expanded notes for publication was mandated by his publisher, they already existed in a form during the writing of the poem and Eliot had intended to include references for quotations.<sup>105</sup> Litz argues that Eliot's regret about the publication of the notes is with the way they had a "centrifugal effect on most criticism, driving the reader away from the work and into ever-widening circles of source-study and influence-charting."<sup>106</sup> The notes have a significant role within the interpretive work associated with the poem, but it is necessary that they are held proportionately to the text. Eliot's own critical work in "The Frontiers of Criticism" details the way that source study can only have import by contributing critical value.<sup>107</sup> Poetry, Eliot states, does not hold a single interpretation that can be found through a close analysis of the author's sources in order to determine the meaning of the work.<sup>108</sup> In following with Eliot's

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<sup>102</sup> I contend that intertextual allusions can be understood as having a similar function to the rhizomes of a plant. They form a new plant but are linked to, and maintain the integrity of, the plant from which they came.

<sup>103</sup> By Liveright, December 1922.

<sup>104</sup> A. Walton Litz, "The Waste Land Fifty Years After," *Journal of Modern Literature* 2 (1972): 455-471, 463.

<sup>105</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," in *Still and Still Moving, 1954-1956*, eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 8 of *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2019), 121-138, 127.

<sup>106</sup> Litz, "The Waste Land Fifty Years After," 463.

<sup>107</sup> Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," 130.

<sup>108</sup> Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," 131.

hermeneutical approach, this thesis uses the notes to develop a broader understanding of Eliot's poem through the references he makes, but not at the expense of a critical engagement with the poetic text.

In addition to the notes that Eliot added to the poem, the 1971 facsimile edition offers insight into the poet's writing process but should not be used as more than a contextual document. *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript* is a compilation of early drafts of the poem, and annotations from Ezra Pound, which give insight into the history of *The Waste Land* and the various intentions and directions which were altered or removed through the editing process. It is integral to acknowledge that Eliot's published text is primary in any study of *The Waste Land*, however the facsimile offers context to the thought process behind the poem. For the purpose of this thesis the facsimile will be considered in certain sections where it elucidates Eliot's intentions, but the focus will remain on the published poem in order to prejudice the editing decisions which Eliot made.

## 2.2 Interpretative Methods and Literary Criticism

In the nearly 100 years since the publication of *The Waste Land* there has been an abundance of different critical approaches to the poem. For some, the focus remains thematic with questions around despair or hope and whether the poem is nihilistic or a move towards faith. Others choose to largely disregard theme and address the poem's structure with particular interest in the mythical method. These differences of focus are largely tied to the range of theories for literary criticism that have abounded throughout the twentieth century. Harriet Davidson uses Paul Ricoeur's concepts of a "hermeneutic of suspicion" or a "hermeneutic of recovery" to categorise the different academic approaches; terms that can be replaced by "explanation" and "understanding" respectively.<sup>109</sup> A hermeneutic of suspicion seeks to identify structural elements of the poem in order to discern meaning, as shown by the work of

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<sup>109</sup> Harriet Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics: Absence and Interpretation in The Waste Land* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 12, 21.



critics like Cleanth Brooks, Helen Gardner, and Grover Smith on the mythic method. Eliot proposes the mythic method in his review of Joyce's *Ulysses* as a "way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."<sup>110</sup> Literature, according to Eliot, is being written according to this method; to follow the mythic method for criticism is to read the poem by "tying myth to technique" in a way that seeks to uncover the hidden meaning of the poem.<sup>111</sup> This method uses a New Critical approach to produce a close reading of the poem as a self-contained object. Elements of this critical method will be used in this thesis, particularly with reference to the structure of the poem, but the broader focus will be on the development of meaning in the poem through a "hermeneutic of recovery."

As opposed to the "mythic method," the approach of a "hermeneutic of recovery" focusses on discovering the object of the poem as it is presented. Eliot's own comments on literary theory in *The Sacred Wood* are targeted towards an approach that seeks to find meaning in works of literature without care for the literature itself.<sup>112</sup> Eliot cautions against criticism that violates the text by using impressionistic readings to "begin to create something else."<sup>113</sup> The intent of criticism should rather be to recover the meaning in the object and not construct a new object altogether. Compared to New Criticism, this is a more traditional critical approach which is interested in authorial intentionality to generate a sense of the original meaning of the text. The focus is to discover the text as it is rather than construct another or elucidate issues secondary to the meaning. This thesis follows this methodology to develop an understanding of the meaning that Eliot depicts in his poem, however it must be done in partnership with a "hermeneutic of suspicion" due to the limitations of a focus on

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<sup>110</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth: A Review of *Ulysses*, by James Joyce," in *The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, eds. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard, vol. 2 of *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2019), 476-481, 478.

<sup>111</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 14.

<sup>112</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 21.

<sup>113</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1928), 5.

authorial intent. The combined approach of the two hermeneutics helps, as Davidson suggests, to “account for its densities and its absences.”<sup>114</sup>

In terms of genre, this thesis asserts that Eliot’s poem exhibits a depiction of the human experience of suffering that functions as a tragedy. The overall structure of the poem, in five acts, serves as a correlation to the structure of an Elizabethan tragedy.<sup>115</sup> Tragic drama, Rowan Williams explains, “assumes that practically unspeakable things happen and that our various political, metaphysical, and religious concordats with reality are as fragile as could be.”<sup>116</sup> Tim Gooderham points specifically to Eliot’s use of Shakespearian tragic dramas to define the tragedy of the poem. The contrast between Eliot’s references to the grand situation of the Shakespearean tragedies and the experiences of the characters living in the waste land highlights that the situations in “*The Waste Land* are just as tragic, if in a very different way.”<sup>117</sup> Identification of the tragic genre of the poem places the exegetical reading in terms of the questions that tragedy raises of the state of life of the individuals at the centre of the experience.

In light of the preceding discussion of the hermeneutical approaches to the poem this thesis has two central foci that guide the exegetical reading of the poem. The first is the way that Eliot constructs an image of living death as a consequence of a loss of meaningful revelation in society. Prophetic voices in the poem establish the tone of the world, one that is unable to process the insight the seers may provide. The result of this loss of meaning is a lifeless existence that is readily equated with death. Following this exposition, the thesis turns to the question of the possibility of regeneration that is raised throughout the poem. This discussion of regeneration is particularly related to the narratives of the Fisher King and

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<sup>114</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 23.

<sup>115</sup> C. B. Cox, “T. S. Eliot: The Opening Lines of ‘The Burial of the Dead’ from ‘The Waste Land’,” *Critical Survey* 6 (1973): 86-89, 89.

<sup>116</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 2.

<sup>117</sup> Tim Gooderham, “Shakespeare and ‘Tragedy’ in ‘The Waste Land’,” *Critical Survey* 3 (1991): 178-185, 181.

vegetation ceremonies which are identified, and highlighted by Eliot in his notes, as central extended metaphors. Eliot uses these tropes to signify forms that may once have been hopeful but the repeated impotence in the poem suggests that they are no longer able to bring effective change. The lingering question in the poem is whether, in the wake of the failure of the vegetation ceremonies, Eliot offers any successful system for restoration of the waste land.

### 3 Living Death and Fragmentation

The consequences of tragic suffering in *The Waste Land* are represented through the impotence and unintelligibility of prophetic voices in the face of a desire for revelation. Eliot develops an image of living death that depicts the state of the inhabitants of the waste land as a result of the teleological loss associated with the unintelligibility of their experiences. This experience of living death is marked by a fragmentation of the self that is exemplified in the breakdown of the characters' interpersonal relationships. This chapter explores T. S. Eliot's imagery of living death as a significant part of the human experience he explicates in the poem.

#### 3.1 Fragmentation of Meaning

Within the text of *The Waste Land* there is a repeated desire for some form of revelation or construction of meaning. The poem lacks a clear voice, which exemplifies the fragmentation that Eliot represents, and creates an absence of structural clarity. Eliot's notes indicate that the character of Tiresias is the unifying voice of the text. This chapter maintains, with Shari Benstock, that Tiresias is exemplary of the illusory nature of prophetic insight in the fragmentary world that Eliot depicts.<sup>118</sup> The seemingly minor character of the ancient seer unifies the many prophetic voices that speak in an attempt to create meaning in a space where it is sought out but remains elusive. The voices of the poem's prophets, the Sibyl, Madame Sosostris, and Tiresias, interweave with the lives of the waste land's inhabitants and offer them riddles and silence in response to their questions. The ancient prophet who sees everything is just as incapable of expressing what he foretells as any other visionary that tries to speak into a world in which fragmentation renders knowledge meaningless.

A central element of *The Waste Land* is Eliot's use of polyphony to create a poem that is without a consistent structural voice. The original title of the poem, "He Do the Police in Different Voices," alludes to the many persona that feature in the text. Harriet Davidson

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<sup>118</sup> Benstock, "1922 and After," 338.

highlights the way that this multiplicity results in a poem that “presents a world defined by the absence of a central stabilizing force, whether God, logic, the self, or empirical certainty.”<sup>119</sup> The poem’s lack of a clear central figure is a common point of interest for scholars who look in a variety of places for a structural motif. The absence, Davidson suggests, is itself “the primary communication of the poem.”<sup>120</sup> She states that “the poem simply does not have what we would identify as a controlling consciousness, and this absence is a powerful and disturbing one.”<sup>121</sup> Similarly, Cornelia Cook, in her discussion of the scriptural allusions used in Eliot’s early poetry, explores the lack of revelation that infiltrates the world of the poem.<sup>122</sup> The “desire for such illumination is everywhere,” she holds, as shown through the motif of prophecy and questioning which Eliot uses throughout the whole text.<sup>123</sup> Absence of revelation becomes a kind of presence in the poem, a stabilizing force, through the polyphonic voices of the poem that contribute a sense of structure in the constant search for meaningful revelation.

This absence of a clear voice or structural persona is challenged by Eliot’s own claims about the role of the prophetic characters in the text. The first prophetic voice of the poem is the Sibyl who speaks in the epigraph. Eliot uses epigraphs in his poetry to establish key themes which will feature throughout the text that follows.<sup>124</sup> The epigraph for *The Waste Land* reads: “Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν [I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her: ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ she

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<sup>119</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 102.

<sup>120</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 3.

<sup>122</sup> Cornelia Cook, “The Hidden Apocalypse: T. S. Eliot’s Early Work,” *Literature and Theology* 10 (1996): 68-80, 74.

<sup>123</sup> Cook, “The Hidden Apocalypse,” 74.

<sup>124</sup> Jane Worthington, “The Epigraphs to the Poetry of T. S. Eliot,” *American Literature* 21 (1949): 1-17, 1.

answered: 'I want to die'.']"<sup>125</sup> This is a quote from Petronius's *Satyricon*, a late first century Roman text about life for the lower classes in the Roman Empire. The only reference to the Sibyl in Petronius's text is this sentence, with a fuller account of her story told in Book XIV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The Sibyl was the beloved of Apollo and, when offered whatever she chose, she asked for as many years as were contained in a handful of dust.<sup>126</sup> However, she forgot to ask for eternal youth and when she scorned Apollo's love she began to wither and age. In the *Satyricon*, the Sibyl is discussed in the middle of a dinner party hosted by Trimalchio and represents a reminder of death which Trimalchio is preoccupied with in much of his dialogue.<sup>127</sup>

In addition to alluding to the problem of death, Eliot's inclusion of the Sibyl in his epigraph establishes the image of prophets that he continues through the other seers in the poem. Jane Worthington analyses a number of Eliot's epigraphs and comments that the connections between the society of the *Satyricon* and *The Waste Land* are "easily discernible" as both societies are "similarly characterized by vulgarity, lust, and greed."<sup>128</sup> Wisdom may be desired and given by seers in such societies, and yet, as Worthington argues, it is not understood and the prophets are left to hang in cages.<sup>129</sup> The Sibyl is representative of masses of accumulated knowledge over time and Michael Holt highlights the way she signifies the "futility of mere knowledge."<sup>130</sup> In spite of the wisdom she holds through centuries of watching society, all that the Sibyl is able to offer is a personal desire for death. Sibyl, like Tiresias, sees all of the fragments of the poem but the breakdown of the society which she inhabits restricts her ability to enact a prophetic role and provide revelation. Her desire for

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<sup>125</sup> Epigraph to *The Waste Land*. This is Eliot's own translation. See Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 126.

<sup>126</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2010), 389.

<sup>127</sup> H. D. Cameron, "The Sibyl in the 'Satyricon'," *The Classical Journal* 65 (1970): 337-339, 338.

<sup>128</sup> Worthington, "The Epigraphs to the Poetry of T. S. Eliot," 14.

<sup>129</sup> This fate is literal in the case of the story of the Sibyl who is found this way by the speaker of her story in *The Satyricon*. See Worthington, "The Epigraphs to the Poetry of T. S. Eliot," 14.

<sup>130</sup> Michael Holt, "Hope and Fear: Tension in 'The Waste Land'," *College Literature* 8 (1981): 21-32, 29.

death issues from the fact that the knowledge which she amasses is not a sufficient base for the construction of meaning. The Sibyl passage shows how revelation is elusive to the extent that even the prophets which should receive it are unable to find a substantive way to ascribe sufficient meaning to living in order to make it seem worthwhile.

The second seer in the poem is Madame Sosostris, a “famous clairvoyante” who “is known to be the wisest woman in Europe”.<sup>131</sup> Eliot’s introduction of Madame Sosostris creates a false dichotomy that juxtaposes the woman’s wisdom with her “bad cold” and suggests that her clairvoyance could be impacted by a minor illness.<sup>132</sup> The ironic contrast of her physical ailment against her wisdom presents Sosostris to the reader as an unreliable source of revelation and Eliot’s notes on the section engender further mistrust in the information she provides. Eliot claims in the notes, “I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards,” and suggests that he has simply used the images for his own purposes.<sup>133</sup> However, as Donald Childs shows in his studies on Eliot and the occult, there is clear evidence that Eliot had more knowledge of the occult than he attests.<sup>134</sup> Eliot had attended various seances and had numerous encounters with Tarot that would have introduced him to the images which he employs for Sosostris’s reading.<sup>135</sup> The ironic introduction of Sosostris contrasts with the later description of Tiresias who is given prophetic authority whereas Sosostris’s wisdom is portrayed as something of a fraud or a joke.

In his draft Eliot points explicitly to Sosostris’s role as seer for the poem and insinuates that her voice is significant in the understanding of prophetic impotence through the text. He includes in the Tarot section a quote from Revelation 22:8, “I John saw these things, and heard them,” which was later removed by Pound.<sup>136</sup> In her analysis of the biblical

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<sup>131</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 43-45.

<sup>132</sup> Donald J. Childs, “Fantastic Views: T. S. Eliot and the Occultation of Knowledge and Experience,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 39 (1997): 357-374, 367.

<sup>133</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 147.

<sup>134</sup> Childs, “Fantastic Views,” 367.

<sup>135</sup> Childs, “Fantastic Views,” 367.

<sup>136</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 9.

apocalyptic connections in Eliot's early work, Cook argues that John's prophetic role in Revelation is to present a picture of the world inhabited by his readers that speaks truth from God about their situation.<sup>137</sup> Eliot's allusion to John's vision in Revelation illustrates his intention for the clairvoyante to enact the role of seer in the poem through the way she reveals the truth of the contemporary world. Benstock argues that the Tarot achieves this role through the way it "provides another framework for the poem, one that reinforces the desperate nature of man's search for God amid the wasteland of the modern city."<sup>138</sup> Sosostris's Tarot reading guides the poem as it introduces the extended metaphors of *The Waste Land* in a way that shows their direct connections to each other. The seer exemplifies the way that knowledge and wisdom can be used to create meaning in the broken framework of the waste land, yet Eliot's treatment of her Tarot reading suggests that the society she sits within is not receptive to the illumination that she can provide.

Madame Sosostris is the most verbal seer in the poem and her revelation is successful in the sense that she describes the whole substance of the text. Eliot's note to line 46 outlines the links between her cards and the characters of the poem. "The Hanged Man" is "the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples of Emmaus in Part V" and a symbol of life-giving sacrificial death.<sup>139</sup> The "drowned Phoenician Sailor" returns in Part IV and also in frequent references to "death by water".<sup>140</sup> "Belladonna," although not referred to in Eliot's notes, is the female archetype of the poem which is paralleled by "the Man with Three Staves" who Eliot connects to the Fisher King myth and the male archetypal figure.<sup>141</sup> At the early point in the poem of Sosostris's appearance Eliot outlines the substance of what will come through the voice of Madame Sosostris. Despite the way that Eliot discredits her medium, Sosostris's

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<sup>137</sup> Cook, "The Hidden Apocalypse," 75.

<sup>138</sup> Benstock, "1922 and After," 345.

<sup>139</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 147.

<sup>140</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 147.

<sup>141</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 147.



Tarot reading is repeatedly remembered in the later sections of the poem which clarifies her role as prophetess.

However, the failure of Sosostris's reading is found in the unintelligibility that it carries for its recipients. The fragments of Sosostris's horoscope repeat throughout the poem and find themselves caught up in the personae that Tiresias comes to embody. In this sense, her Tarot reading is fairly accurate, she prophesies about the content of the poem that follows her reading.<sup>142</sup> Childs outlines the epistemological function of Sosostris as a Tarot reader who "is confronted with a world that needs to be interpreted, and ... cooperates with others to construct a common world."<sup>143</sup> Her vision is fragmentary, there are things she is "forbidden to see", and she is not presented with the same authority that Tiresias carries.<sup>144</sup> In defence of Sosostris's limitations, Childs argues that she sees "a world under construction" in an "open and creative form."<sup>145</sup> The fragmentary nature of Sosostris's reading shows that despite the fact that it is a moment where revelation occurs in the poem, as with the Sibyl, it is the brokenness of society which inhibits the vision being understood. The world that the seer speaks into is limited in its capacity to comprehend the Tarot reading, as much as the seer is potentially hindered by her "bad cold".<sup>146</sup>

These futile prophetic voices are united in the character of Tiresias who offers no revelation in the poem in spite of the fact that he, like the Sibyl, has seen everything. Eliot claims in his notes that Tiresias, while "a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest."<sup>147</sup> Scholars debate the centrality of Tiresias's organising role to the poem despite Eliot's claim that "what Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem."<sup>148</sup> In his discussion of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*

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<sup>142</sup> Childs, "Fantastic Views," 368.

<sup>143</sup> Childs, "Fantastic Views," 369.

<sup>144</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 54.

<sup>145</sup> Childs, "Fantastic Views," 371.

<sup>146</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 44.

<sup>147</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 148.

<sup>148</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 148.

Matthew Scully argues for the significance of Tiresias due to the way that “all of history, all of the fragments within the poem, have been seen and comprehended already by Tiresias, which seems to emphasize his role as organising figure.”<sup>149</sup> Benstock, however, highlights the impotence of Tiresias who is “merely an indifferent observer whose prophetic powers belong to the world antithetical to the human, not sympathetic with it.”<sup>150</sup> He sees everything, “though blind,” but is mute, offering no insight or warning to the characters which inhabit the waste land he watches.<sup>151</sup> Eliot esteems Tiresias as the central voice of the poem, and even though his sole prophetic ability appears impotent, his unifying role allows him to appropriate the actions of the poem’s other voices.

Tiresias’s actions in the poem function within the frame of the ancient myths which Eliot references in order to build a prophetic archetype at the heart of the poem. Tiresias is a figure that appears in Greek and Roman mythology in a range of different myths that recount the origin of his visionary gift, his blindness, and his hermaphroditism. In the notes Eliot specifically quotes from the version of the myth described in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.<sup>152</sup> *Metamorphoses* is a narrative poem from 8 CE which chronicles the history of the world in the Roman framework. In Book III, Ovid describes the origin of Tiresias’s blindness and his prophetic gift. Tiresias is called upon to settle an argument between Jupiter and Juno about the difference between male and female sexual pleasure due to his familiarity with the experience of either sex.<sup>153</sup> Tiresias’s authority in this argument is established by his history; he was turned into a woman for seven years after striking apart serpents which he saw mating. His decision to side with Jupiter results in Juno rendering him blind, to which Jupiter responds by offering “the power / To see the future.”<sup>154</sup> Ovid’s account of Tiresias’s history, as retold

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<sup>149</sup> Matthew Scully, “Plasticity at the Violet Hour: Tiresias, *The Waste Land*, and Poetic Form,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 41 (2018): 166-182, 169.

<sup>150</sup> Benstock, “1922 and After,” 338.

<sup>151</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 218.

<sup>152</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 148.

<sup>153</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 75.

<sup>154</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 75.

by Eliot, means that the character is inherently tied to issues of sexual pleasure in a way that illuminates the section of the poem in which he first appears.

There is debate about the role of Tiresias as an organising figure in the poem as his active appearance in the text is brief. Scully shows the way that Tiresias “can see all of time simultaneously,” and maintains that he “seems to be the persona representing absolute stasis and stability within *The Waste Land*.”<sup>155</sup> As a prophet, Tiresias has seen all of the fragments that Eliot collates in the poem and, on Scully’s account, is therefore the force which orders everything through his interpretation of what he sees. Contrary to Scully who takes seriously Eliot’s note on Tiresias’s role in the text, M.A.R. Habib suggests that there is instead “a dislocation between his divine ability to see the totality of events and his human dimension which can perceive merely a puzzle of disconnected particulars.”<sup>156</sup> The prophet sees the substance of the poem but this does not place him in the central role that Scully claims. Rather, Tiresias is a symbol of prophetic impotence who sees but does not communicate in the way that Madame Sosostris does. Instead of being implicitly oppositional, these two views present different elements of the way that Tiresias functions. He is both a symbol of the impotence of prophecy and also fulfils an ordering role associated with his union of all the characters in the text through the way that he draws together the male and female archetypes.

Tiresias’s ordering role in the poem is found through the relationship of the male and female archetypes to his dual gendering. In Eliot’s note on Tiresias he argues that all the male characters of the poem are “not wholly distinct” from one another, the female characters are similarly united, “and the two sexes meet in Tiresias.”<sup>157</sup> The creation of male and female archetypes in the poem centres on the unifying of the gendered voices in sexual experiences. Male characters are held together through the image of both sexual and spiritual impotence in the Fisher King. Eliot states that “the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the

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<sup>155</sup> Scully, “Plasticity at the Violet Hour,” 169.

<sup>156</sup> M.A.R. Habib, *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 222.

<sup>157</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 148.

Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples.”<sup>158</sup>

The male characters have recurring experiences of death and drowning and remember the experiences of others as if they are their own. As an example, in “A Game of Chess,” the silent male speaker remembers the death of the Phoenician sailor, stating “those are pearls that were his eyes”, and the vision of the hyacinth garden which occur in the previous section.<sup>159</sup> In the draft of *The Waste Land*, Eliot had this character directly state “I remember the hyacinth garden,” and while this line was removed in the editing process, he retains the link between the two scenes through his notes.<sup>160</sup> Both of the scenes which this speaker refers to are moments of death in life, and the hyacinth garden particularly references the loss of sexual fulfilment. The unified male characters are held together in the archetype of the Fisher King by their experiences of sexual futility which are bound up with the living death trope.

The development of a female archetype in the poem is less explicit than that of the Fisher King, but Philip Sicker argues that it is characterised by the woman in Madame Sosostris’s Tarot: “Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks, / The lady of situations.”<sup>161</sup> Belladonna, as a contrast to the fertility symbol of the hyacinth, is a poisonous representation of the loss of sexual health in the waste land and unifies the voices of the prostituted women of the poem. The woman in “A Game of Chess” fears abandonment from her unresponsive lover, the women in the bar discuss the necessity of sexually enticing a returning partner, and the typist is the numb, albeit veiled, recipient of male sexual desire. Sicker argues that the narcissism of the belladonna archetype equates with the castration of the Fisher King to create an image of “sexual self-abuse or masturbation.”<sup>162</sup> Despite the lack of desire displayed by the typist, her prostitution exists within a narcissistic frame that is reflective of the other women

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<sup>158</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 148.

<sup>159</sup> The hyacinth garden stanza is lines 35-42; the Phoenician Sailor is raised by Madame Sosostris in line 47; the silent male voice remembers the seer’s vision in line 125.

<sup>160</sup> Philip Sicker, “The Belladonna: Eliot’s Female Archetype in *The Waste Land*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 30 (1984): 420-431, 422.

<sup>161</sup> Sicker, “The Belladonna,” 420.

<sup>162</sup> Sicker, “The Belladonna,” 426.

in the poem. She is self-focussed as shown through Eliot's use of the mirror when "she turns and looks a moment in the glass / Hardly aware of her departed lover."<sup>163</sup> Her focus is inwards with no regard given to the encounter that has just passed. The typist, as an example of the belladonna, collapses the sexual impulse of the other female characters into narcissism and typifies the sexual futility which is described in the male archetype of the Fisher King.

Both the male and female archetypes are unified in the person of Tiresias. In his narration of the typist's encounter he assumes the experience of the woman when he states, "I Tiresias have foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed".<sup>164</sup> This statement highlights that the unity that Tiresias enacts is one of experiential suffering. He has "foresuffered," and therefore already knows the sexual brokenness that is symbolised in the archetypes of the Fisher King and the belladonna. The unity that he creates between the genders is characterised by the unity of all sexual acts which he claims occur on "this same divan or bed".<sup>165</sup> There is, in Eliot's description, a form of existential unity that pervades the boundaries between individuals through Tiresias's prophecy. The suffering that Tiresias unifies is sexual and is also a continuation of the living death trope that Eliot has already established. In her hermeneutical work, Davidson demonstrates the way "the sexual relationship is where the conjunction of death and desire is always most powerful and disturbing."<sup>166</sup> Tiresias's union of the genders generalises the experience of living death through the dispirited and broken nature of the sexual act that the male and female archetypes embody.

The prophetic voices in *The Waste Land* contribute little of value to the desire for revelation expressed in the poem. They see the substance of the poem, but Sibyl and Tiresias illustrate the futility of knowledge and life more than they do wisdom. However, Tiresias's role in unifying the male and female archetypes of the poem, and by extension all of the

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<sup>163</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 249-250.

<sup>164</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 243-4.

<sup>165</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 234.

<sup>166</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 126.

characters, means that the character's experiences are mediated through his perspective. The expression of sexual futility which is tied to prophetic impotence helps to inform the state of living death that Eliot ties to a form of meaninglessness which occurs in a society that lacks the revelation it desires.

### 3.2 Living Death

The existence of the characters in *The Waste Land* is fragmentary due to their experience of tragic suffering and meaninglessness. Eliot uses the metaphor of living death, an existential state where both life and death exist simultaneously, to express meaninglessness in the world of his poem.<sup>167</sup> Death functions in three ways through the poem: as a state of meaningless life, as an object of desire, and as a possibility of release. The first section of the poem, "The Burial of the Dead," raises the idea of what Cleanth Brooks calls the "attractiveness of death" as well as the "difficulty in rousing oneself from the death in life in which the people of the waste land live."<sup>168</sup> Brooks compounds these two concepts, but their distinctness makes it integral to address the two functions of death separately. In what follows, this thesis explores the ways in which death infiltrates Eliot's poetry in order to best comprehend the state of life which the poet describes in the wake of a loss of meaning. This existential state, Davidson argues, sits between the boundary of "desire and death in which finite existence always just escapes our efforts to capture it in the word."<sup>169</sup> The visions of human existence Eliot's poem captures are ones which highlight the consequences of an absence of meaning in life and the function of death in relation to meaning loss and meaning creation.

The relationship between *The Waste Land* and Dante's *Inferno* is a significant component in Eliot's depiction of death. Lines 62 to 63 of *The Waste Land* outline Eliot's own daily commute to the financial district juxtaposed with allusions to the *Inferno*. The speaker

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<sup>167</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 138.

<sup>168</sup> Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, 138.

<sup>169</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 134.

states, “a crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many.”<sup>170</sup> In his notes, Eliot directly references the third canto of Dante’s poem that describes the observation of the dead on the banks of the Acheron: “si lunga tratta / di gente, ch’io non avrei mai creduto / che morte tanta n’avesse disfatta, [drawn by that banner was so long a trail / of men and women I should not have thought / that death could ever have unmade so many.]”<sup>171</sup> The crowds that Dante sees on the Acheron are ambiguous, neither inside of hell nor out of it. They are unworthy of hell or heaven as their lives “were void alike of honour and ill fame.”<sup>172</sup> Susan Colón argues that “this echo of *Inferno* III.57 links the swarming commuters with Dante’s ‘neutrals,’ unworthy even of hell because of their aimless, uncommitted lives.”<sup>173</sup> The Thames becomes Eliot’s Acheron, London his hell, and the crowd of commuters his dead. Eliot’s crowds inhabit a state of ambiguity as they are “undone by death” but still live their day to day existence in London.

Eliot’s references to Dante allow him to depict the state of life, living death, that he believes is occupied by those without meaningful existence. This undead existence, claims Florence Jones, describes those “already dead in the spirit, but not yet gone beyond despair into comfortable oblivion.”<sup>174</sup> The line that follows the first reference to the *Inferno* is connected in Eliot’s notes to Canto IV lines 25-27 in which the speaker describes the experience of entering the first circle of hell: “quivi, secondo che per ascoltare, / non avea pianto, ma’ che sospiri, / che l’aura eterna facevan tremare [Here in the dark (where only hearing told) / there were no tears, no weeping, only sighs / that caused a trembling in the eternal air.]”<sup>175</sup> Through the second allusion Eliot’s ambiguous crowd transforms into the

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<sup>170</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 62-3.

<sup>171</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 147; Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 13.

<sup>172</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 13.

<sup>173</sup> Susan E. Colón, “‘This Twittering World’: T. S. Eliot and Acedia,” *Religion & Literature* 43 (2011): 69-90, 69.

<sup>174</sup> Florence Jones, “T. S. Eliot Among the Prophets,” *American Literature* 38 (1966): 285-302, 293.

<sup>175</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 147; Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 16.

sighing masses of the first circle who “never sinned. And some attained to merit. / But merit falls far short. None was baptized. / None passed the gate, in your belief, to faith.”<sup>176</sup> Similar to the neutrals from Eliot’s earlier reference, the souls whose sighing he appropriates in his poem are excluded from life due to a lack of faithful conviction. Eliot uses Dante as a way to describe the type of existence that is experienced due to the loss of revelation that he sees in society. Life remains, like for Dante’s neutrals and those in the first circle of hell, but mere existence without teleological significance is akin to death.

The representation of living death in the poem is tied to Eliot’s ontological understanding of human existence. Eliot’s use of Charles Baudelaire’s poetry in the same section helps to clarify the significance of the allusions to Dante. This final stanza of “The Burial of the Dead” is framed by Eliot’s references to Baudelaire: line 60, “Unreal City,” alludes to Baudelaire’s poem “Les Sept Vieillards” from *Fleurs du Mal* and line 76 references the preface to this collection.<sup>177</sup> Eliot quotes the first two lines of the poem in his notes: “Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves, / Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant! [Unreal city, city full of dreams, / where ghosts in broad daylight cling to passers-by.]”<sup>178</sup> The quotation of these two lines invokes the ghostly sense of the city that Baudelaire describes. Baudelaire’s Paris becomes Eliot’s London, where the living are constantly reminded of death by the ghosts that surround them. The Baudelaire allusions imply that the city is haunted by the living who have lost the full essence of life. The haunted city compounds the reminders of death from Eliot’s references to Dante. Eliot’s commuters are simultaneously the ghosts in the unreal city and the ambiguous inhabitants on the shore of the Acheron. Neither dead nor alive, they are condemned to their hellish existence by a loss of faith like those in the first circle of hell.

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<sup>176</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 17.

<sup>177</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 60, l. 76.

<sup>178</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 147; Translation from Lawrence Rainey, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot’s Contemporary Prose*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 83.



Eliot's references to Baudelaire contribute to the imagery of living death established in the opening section of the poem. In his book on modern poetry Brooks analyses *The Waste Land's* references to Baudelaire in the context of Eliot's 1930 preface to an English edition of the French work.<sup>179</sup> In the essay, Eliot expounds Baudelaire's existential theory which argues that "la volupté suprême de l'amour gît dans la certitude de faire le mal [the unique and supreme pleasure in love-making lies in the certain knowledge that one is doing *evil*]" as a distinction between the sexual relationships of humans and those of animals.<sup>180</sup> This statement exemplifies, claims Eliot, Baudelaire's wider philosophy which he summarises as "so far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist."<sup>181</sup> In *The Waste Land*, Eliot's use of Baudelaire alludes to the state of non-existence that Baudelaire suggests is possible through the loss of the ability to act morally. Brooks claims that through Baudelaire's philosophy Eliot illustrates how "the fact that men have lost the knowledge of good and evil keeps them from being alive, and is the justification for viewing the modern waste land as a realm in which the inhabitants do not even exist."<sup>182</sup> Existence which relies on morality, posits Eliot, cannot exist in the waste land due to the loss of knowledge that the inhabitants exhibit. Baudelaire's work provides the philosophical grounds for the state of non-existence, living death, that Eliot describes for his characters.

Living death is enacted in the poem through the characters' decay of will and fragmentation of self. Baudelaire's philosophy of non-existence relies on the loss of knowledge of good and evil which is exemplified in *The Waste Land* through the destruction of the myths that once gave relevance to prophetic voices. The fragmented myths from which

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<sup>179</sup> Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, 138.

<sup>180</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Baudelaire," in *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953), 185-196, 194; Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Norman Cameron (Madison: Syrens, 1995), 7.

<sup>181</sup> Eliot, "Baudelaire," 194.

<sup>182</sup> Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, 138.

Eliot constructs his poem are emblematic of the breakdown of societal metanarratives that support individual identity formation. For the inhabitants, Jones suggests the drought of the waste land emphasises how the “extent of their despair is that, having lost sight of the purpose behind their history, they have lost identity and the basis for hope.”<sup>183</sup> The disjuncture that results in the breakdown of the waste land society means that the self no longer has clear connections to the past in order to form a coherent identity. Davidson connects this loss of self to contemporary poets’ rejections of God and wider post-war literary secularisation.<sup>184</sup> The advertisements for Pound’s *Blast* journal in 1912 proclaimed the “End of the Christian era” as a defining piece of the modernist movement in which Eliot was involved.<sup>185</sup> In the wake of the fracturing of society’s constructive mythology, Eliot describes the faithlessness and the loss of identity that shape the new society.

### 3.3 Breakdown of the Self

The consequences of the existential state of living death are exemplified in the way that sexual relationships function in the poem. In the second section of *The Waste Land*, “A Game of Chess,” Eliot describes a dialogue between a couple going to bed. Quotation marks play an important part in this section of the poem to indicate the difference between the two voices. While the female voice speaks aloud, with quotation marks, the male voice is internalised and only accessible through the voice of the poem. After a series of ignored phrases the female speaker asks “are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?”<sup>186</sup> Throughout this section the female’s trivial statements are contrasted with the male’s thoughts of war and death which consider “rats’ alley / where the dead men lost their bones.”<sup>187</sup> In her contextual reading,

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<sup>183</sup> Jones, “T. S. Eliot Among the Prophets,” 286.

<sup>184</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 7.

<sup>185</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era: The Age of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 237.

<sup>186</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 127

<sup>187</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 115-6.

Sandra Gilbert employs a biographical account of Eliot's work which focusses on the personal losses he endured during World War One. The death of Jean Verdenal in 1915 had a significant impact on Eliot's poetry and Gilbert cites this passage in "A Game of Chess" as evidence of Eliot's personal narrative in the poem which is of "a waste land at whose center his dead friend is buried."<sup>188</sup> The grief embodied by the unresponsiveness of the male voice in this section combines with the question, "are you alive, or not?", to build Eliot's picture of the human psyche in the face of traumatic loss.<sup>189</sup> The figure is still alive, yet the way they go about their daily life is as if they are already dead like those who they see in "rats' alley."<sup>190</sup>

Loss of identity and living death is performed by Eliot's characters through their automated actions which stem from their decay of will. There are numerous examples in the poem of gestures which are automatic or vacant. The speaker in "A Game of Chess" states, "and we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door", and the following conversation with the women in the bar exemplifies a mechanical sexual perspective.<sup>191</sup> Most telling of the loss of will is the character of the typist who, after her lover leaves, "smoothes her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone."<sup>192</sup> In his analysis of gestic symbolism across the corpus of Eliot's work, Paul Fussell highlights the way that Eliot "has found in the automatic or vacant gesture what seems to be exactly the right symbol for the communication of this terrifying sense of fracture and disconnection which many of his contemporaries have seen at the core of the modern psyche."<sup>193</sup> The character's undriven movements express the reality of self-fragmentation in the poem. Without the impetus of a motive to encourage their actions, the inhabitants of the waste land mechanically enact their living death through automated gestures.

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<sup>188</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, "'Rats' Alley': The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti) Pastoral Elegy," *New Literary History* 30 (1999): 179-201, 193.

<sup>189</sup> Gilbert, "'Rats' Alley'," 193.

<sup>190</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 115.

<sup>191</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 138-9.

<sup>192</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 255-6.

<sup>193</sup> Paul Fussell Jr., "The Gestic Symbolism of T. S. Eliot," *ELH* 22 (1955): 194-211, 200.

The breakdown of the self in the waste land is depicted not only in their actions but also through the characters' inability to express themselves verbally. Eliot frequently uses anacolutha to disrupt the expected grammatical flow and signify rhetorical fragmentation. Discursive fragmentation features in *The Waste Land*, as Anthony Johnson shows, in various instances where "incompleteness of utterance is implicitly being offered as a heightening of epistemological significance."<sup>194</sup> The conversation in "A Game of Chess" uses interrupted thoughts and unanswered questions, for example: "O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag – / It's so elegant / So intelligent / 'What shall I do now?'"<sup>195</sup> This is reminiscent of a similar conversation in Eliot's 1917 poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, in which the speaker states, "It is impossible to say just what I mean" in the midst of an equally futile conversation with a lover.<sup>196</sup> The inability of utterance is paradigmatic of the fragmentation of self, and by extension of relationships, that Eliot associates with the state of living death inhabited by his characters.

The fragmentation of Eliot's characters places them at the centre of their own narratives in a way that is divorced from the world around them. The few interpersonal interactions that happen in the poem barely acknowledge the presence of the other, with characters who speak and receive no reply. The couple in "A Game of Chess" continue their own trains of thought regardless of the reaction of their partner, and the woman who speaks during the bar scene ignores the call of closing time.<sup>197</sup> Most explicitly, the encounter between the typist and her lover in "The Fire Sermon" occurs without any recognition given to the personhood of the other party. Eliot describes the young man's feelings during the assault when he states that "his vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of

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<sup>194</sup> Anthony L. Johnson, "'Broken Images': Discursive Fragmentation and Paradigmatic Integrity in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot," *Poetics Today* 6 (1985): 399-416, 406.

<sup>195</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 128-31.

<sup>196</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), l. 105.

<sup>197</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 152-170.

indifference.”<sup>198</sup> The reaction of the typist’s lover suggests a desire for the objectification of the other. The characters’ solipsism is expressed in the internalisation of their experiences to the detriment of their ability to interact meaningfully with others.<sup>199</sup> The breakdown of speech as well as the fragmentation of purposeful metanarratives inhibits these relationships.

Solipsism functions as the consequence of Eliot’s characters’ experience of living death. Towards the end of “What the Thunder Said” Eliot includes in his notes a quote from F. H. Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality*, the subject of Eliot’s doctoral dissertation. Bradley describes the solipsistic state and argues that when “regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.”<sup>200</sup> Eliot provides no context for this reference, yet his doctoral dissertation includes a refutation of the form of existential solipsism that the characters in his poem embody.<sup>201</sup> Throughout his early poetry Eliot engages with the issue of subjectivity and the relationship of the self with others.<sup>202</sup> With a focus on the circular form of *The Waste Land*, William Spanos argues that the allusion to Bradley signifies a “liberation from the circular prison – the solipsistic and alienating subjectivity – of ontotheological metaphysics.”<sup>203</sup> From this perspective, the quote is a gloss on the potential for release from the form of solipsism that Bradley describes as opposed to an existentialist philosophical statement. Eliot acknowledges that the danger of the solipsism that his characters have descended into is a likely outcome of the fragmentation that is implicit in their lifelessness.

An implication of solipsism in the poem is the breakdown of relationships which parallels Eliot’s depiction of sexual futility. The hyacinth garden scene in the middle of “The

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<sup>198</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 241-2.

<sup>199</sup> Sicker, “The Belladonna,” 429.

<sup>200</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 149.

<sup>201</sup> Ryan R. Holston, “Historical Truth in the Hermeneutics of T. S. Eliot,” *Harvard Theological Review* 111 (2018): 264-288, 266.

<sup>202</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 6.

<sup>203</sup> William V. Spanos, “Repetition in *The Waste Land*: A Phenomenological De-struction,” *Boundary 2* 7 (1979): 225-285, 282.

Burial of the Dead” establishes the narrative of sexual fragmentation that Eliot repeats later in the text. This section is framed with Eliot’s quotations from Richard Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde*, and the section ends “Oed’ und leer das Meer [Desolate and empty the sea],” a phrase which occurs in the opera while a dying Tristan waits in hope for Isolde’s arrival.<sup>204</sup> Eliot’s use of the Wagner quotations places the hyacinth scene within the frame of a hopeless romance where the joy of love is overpowered by the inevitability of death. He begins the section with a quote from the first act of the opera: “Frisch weht der Wind / Der Heimat zu / Mein Irisch kind / Wo weilest du [Fresh blows the wind / To the homeland; / My Irish child, / Where are you tarrying?].”<sup>205</sup> The allusion to the opera introduces the type of romantic relationship which the hyacinth scene initially describes; one of longing love for the partner. The stark shift from this initial quotation to the quotation that ends the scene alerts the reader to a change in the framework within which the concept of romance is being addressed. The use of these quotations, Davidson argues, highlights the way that “the self and the world are annihilated in love and in a simultaneous loss of love.”<sup>206</sup> The shift from hopeful longing to empty desolation allows Eliot to encapsulate in the scene a sense of the trauma faced by those whose existence is punctuated by the loss of a desired object.

The hyacinth scene which the Wagner quotes frame further develops the motif of romantic loss used as an example of Eliot’s living death. Lines 37-40 state: “Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden, / Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence.”<sup>207</sup> The beginning of this romantic encounter is positive, the girl is called “hyacinth girl” which is a moniker that is tied to fertility. However, the abrupt change

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<sup>204</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 42; Translation from Rainey, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot’s Contemporary Prose*, 79.

<sup>205</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 31-4; Translation from Rainey, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot’s Contemporary Prose*, 78.

<sup>206</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 125.

<sup>207</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 37-40.

wrought by Eliot's use of the word "yet" signals a breakdown in relationship which results in the hyacinth girl's state of nothingness at the end of the section.<sup>208</sup> Hyacinth girl, like the Sibyl, is not granted the release of death, and lives instead in a state of neither life nor death, only nothingness. Eliot's choice to close the section with the second Wagner quote emphasises the desolation of the return from the sexual ideal of the Hyacinth garden, a return that is marred by the nothingness of life without death. Through the hyacinth girl's change this passage conveys a preoccupation of the text with the connection between romantic encounters and lifelessness.

Male and female sterility come to exemplify the meaninglessness that the poem describes and the lack of revelation which is found in the waste land. Both the hyacinth girl and the Fisher King embody the traditional practices of fertility cults at a time when sex was a central part of religious practices. The hyacinth girl is connected with the myth of Hyacinthus which Ovid recounts in Book X of *The Metamorphoses*. Hyacinthus is a youth who is loved by Apollo and after his death Apollo causes flowers to sprout out of his blood that has been spilt on the ground.<sup>209</sup> The yearly rebirth of the hyacinth flowers are an annual reminder of this mythology and become a symbol within fertility cults. Eliot's hyacinth girl is connected in this to the Fisher King narratives which also draw on ancient cultic fertility symbols. Sicker argues that these archetypes of male and female sterility show that "sexual intercourse has become separated from its original religious meaning and the garden has become the modern wasteland of the poem."<sup>210</sup> The poem's sexual archetypes are disconnected from the cultic practices that give them meaning. As a result, Eliot's living death is associated with his depiction of sexual futility.

The breakdown of the self results in a loss of sexual pleasure due to life being abstracted from teleological significance. Eliot's reference to the Ovidian account of Tiresias alludes to the idea of the difference between male and female sexual pleasure. Although

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<sup>208</sup> Cox, "T. S. Eliot," 88.

<sup>209</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 272-3.

<sup>210</sup> Sicker, "The Belladonna," 422.

Tiresias claims in Ovid's story that the female's pleasure is greater, the juxtaposition with the story of the typist's disinvolvement is stark. The invocation of Tiresias's statement on sexual pleasure outlines Eliot's argument about sexual failure which Sicker argues "signifies a modern spiritual failure."<sup>211</sup> Benstock also identifies this connection in her argument that "the meaninglessness of modern life is reflected in the dispirited movements of the sexual act."<sup>212</sup> The character of the hyacinth girl is conflated with the earlier Marie, as a symbol of sexual health and willingness, which by the later points of the poem "becomes that faint memory of lost sexual health which resides in mankind's collective or cultural consciousness."<sup>213</sup> Loss of sexual health, that has been rendered by the disjuncture in society, is exemplified in the sexual encounter with the typist. Male sexual loss, embodied in the character of the Fisher King, is here equalled with female disinterest in the sexual act, as opposed to the earlier perspective which is detailed in the Hyacinth girl at the start of the poem, and in Tiresias's story that privileges female sexual pleasure.

Tiresias appears in the poem at the beginning of the scene between the typist and her lover. The encounter is narrated by Tiresias, who has "perceived the scene" but he does not speak to the typist about what he has "foretold".<sup>214</sup> The sexual encounter that the typist experiences is juxtaposed with the *Metamorphoses* conversation on sexual pleasure which Eliot invokes in his reference to Ovid's Tiresias. Sicker's analysis of Eliot's female characters in *The Waste Land* and the draft focuses on the unity of Eliot's purpose for the women in the poem through the archetype of the belladonna.<sup>215</sup> The typist's encounter with her lover is one where "all pretense of genuine feelings has disappeared, and the typist, unlike her forerunners, does not appear even to possess a real sexual 'appetite.'"<sup>216</sup> Her endurance of the sexual act

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<sup>211</sup> Sicker, "The Belladonna," 420.

<sup>212</sup> Benstock, "1922 and After," 342.

<sup>213</sup> Sicker, "The Belladonna," 421.

<sup>214</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 229.

<sup>215</sup> Sicker, "The Belladonna," 420.

<sup>216</sup> Sicker, "The Belladonna," 428.



appears mechanical, “exploring hands encounter no defence,” and after her lover has left her “one half-formed thought” is: ““well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.””<sup>217</sup> Sicker claims that Eliot uses the typist to act “out the rapes which the rich lady labors to arrange and which Lil’s cockney friend and Fresca dream about, but she does so without the slightest satisfaction.”<sup>218</sup> The sexual innocence of the hyacinth girl transforms into the disinterest of the typist who represents the disruption of the female sexual experience for the belladonna.

This chapter has argued that the motif of living death established at the beginning of *The Waste Land* is a consequence of the loss of meaning that Eliot associates with suffering. The unintelligibility of the poem’s prophetic voices results in a breakdown of the characters’ relationship to their teleological significance. As a consequence of this state of living death, the self experiences fragmentation which leads to solipsism and ruptures interpersonal relationships. Eliot posits through this vision of living death, and its consequences, an example of the way that meaninglessness, as a result of suffering, fragments the experience of human existence.

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<sup>217</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 240, l. 251, l. 252.

<sup>218</sup> Sicker, “The Belladonna,” 428.

## 4 The Question of Restoration

The establishment of the image of living death runs in parallel in the poem to the ongoing question of whether the waste land can be restored. T. S. Eliot's extended use of fertility narratives as a structural motif highlights the tension between the desire for and the fear of restoration. Rain functions in the poem as a constant reminder of the impotence of forms of meaning making that would bolster the hope of restoration. This leads to the final stanzas of the poem that illustrate the stance of the acceptance of the land's aridity and infertility, and the desire for the finality of death so as to be released from nature's ongoing cycles.

### 4.1 Impotence and Fertility Narratives

Not only do the waste land's inhabitants model an existential state of living death as a result of a loss of meaning, but the finality of death is also questioned. The repeated failure of death in *The Waste Land* is an image of impotence that is tied to sexual futility in the narrative of the Fisher King. The extended allusions to the Fisher King highlight an issue of restoration that recurs throughout the poem from the fear of regeneration in the opening stanzas to the seeming acceptance of the waste land's fate at the end. The question of the possibility of restoration is central to the poem and displays both a desire for, and fear of, the rain that is ambiguous as it is expected to bring fertility but seems, when it appears, to be futile.

The poem develops the symbol of sexual futility as an example of the aridity that tragic experience brings upon the waste land. Impotence is most powerfully seen in the narrative of the Fisher King which Eliot adopts from Jessie Weston's 1920 book *From Ritual to Romance*. Due to his extensive use of the grail imagery Weston describes, Eliot, in his notes, states that this text "will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do."<sup>219</sup> *From Ritual to Romance* is a systematic examination of the numerous grail traditions, their origins, and their similarities, in order to synthesise a sense of the general myth that was

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<sup>219</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 147.

told. The motif of the Fisher King, from grail mythology, echoes throughout *The Waste Land* and poses the question of whether restoration from living death is possible.<sup>220</sup> The idea of the Fisher King narrative is that the hero needs to find the grail in order to heal the king's impotence so his lands can be fertile again.<sup>221</sup> Within the different myths there are a variety of ways this trope functions, but the key connections Eliot makes in his poem are the injury of the king resulting in both his impotence and the impotence of the land, and whether restoration can, if desired, occur.<sup>222</sup> Eliot's use of the grail narratives elucidates the poem's depiction of change and stasis, and the possibility of life being returned.

The image of the impotent land, which can be regenerated but is essentially dead while the Fisher King still suffers, captures Eliot's vision of living death. Babette Deutsch argues that the central vision of the poem is "its intimate, horrifying vision of impotence" which is conjured by allusions to the story of the Fisher King.<sup>223</sup> In many of the grail myths that Weston describes, the land is laid waste due to the illness of the king which is "sympathetically reflected on the land, the loss of virility in the one brings about a suspension of the reproductive processes of Nature on the other."<sup>224</sup> In Eliot's adaptation of the myth, the health of the Fisher King is the standard of well-being for the land, but he also appropriates it as a judgement of sexual virility, and therefore, life.<sup>225</sup> The Fisher King is the unified image of all the males in *The Waste Land*, and he is the bearer of the sexual loss exemplified in the other characters. Philip Sicker describes his infertility as "self-castrating" due to the self-inflicted

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<sup>220</sup> Audrey T. Rodgers, "'He Do the Police in Different Voices': The Design of 'The Waste Land'," *College Literature* 10 (1983): 279-293, 281.

<sup>221</sup> Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1920; repr., Garden City: Anchor Books, 1957), 23.

<sup>222</sup> Rodgers, "'He Do the Police in Different Voices'," 281-2.

<sup>223</sup> Babette Deutsch, "T. S. Eliot and the Laodiceans," *The American Scholar* 9 (1939-1940): 19-30, 27.

<sup>224</sup> Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 23.

<sup>225</sup> Rodgers, "'He Do the Police in Different Voices'," 283.

nature of his impotence in some forms of the myth.<sup>226</sup> Likewise, sexual futility in Eliot's poem is not forced upon the male characters but it is imposed by their solipsism in living death.

In "What the Thunder Said," Eliot describes the way that the land suffers from aridity due to the king's affliction. In his notes Eliot claims that, "What the Thunder Said" employs three themes: "the journey to Emmaus, the approach to the Chapel Perilous ... and the present decay of eastern Europe."<sup>227</sup> The first stanza of the section refers to Christ's betrayal and crucifixion, which leads to the assertion "he who was living is now dead."<sup>228</sup> This death is followed by an image of sympathetic loss of life in both people and the land which suggests a link between this death and the Fisher King.<sup>229</sup> One of the Gawain versions of the grail myths shows the connection between the Fisher King's impotence and the idea of death as, in the story, the Fisher King character is described as "an aged man who, while preserving the semblance of life, is in reality dead."<sup>230</sup> The death at the beginning of "What the Thunder Said" is a similar example of a loss of life which results in the deterioration of the land. While the ambiguity about the life of this character remains, the land is dead, and it waits for the reinvigoration of rain that can only come when the grail quest is achieved.

The following six stanzas of the poem describe the aridity of the waste land in the wake of Christ's death, analogous to the Fisher King. They also reflect the sentiment of the final lines of the first stanza, "We who were living are now dying / With a little patience".<sup>231</sup> Eliot uses the extended metaphor of the waste land not only as a picture of society's decay but also the state of life experienced by the individual. The possibility of regeneration echoes throughout this section of "What the Thunder Said," an example of which occurs in the reference to the Emmaus road encounter.<sup>232</sup> The speaker asks "Who is the third who walks

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<sup>226</sup> Sicker, "The Belladonna," 426.

<sup>227</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 148.

<sup>228</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 328.

<sup>229</sup> Rodgers, "'He Do the Police in Different Voices'," 281.

<sup>230</sup> Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 120.

<sup>231</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 329-330.

<sup>232</sup> Genevieve W. Foster, "The Archetypal Imagery of T. S. Eliot," *PMLA* 60 (1945): 567-585, 574.

always beside you? / When I count, there are only you and I together / But when I look ahead up the white road / There is always another one walking beside you”.<sup>233</sup> Eliot’s earlier note about the Tarot reading associates this hooded figure with “the Hanged God,” a symbol in James Frazer’s text of sacrificial death.<sup>234</sup> This stanza, set firmly in the section Eliot uses to describe the state of the waste land, suggests that there is hope that the death at the beginning of the section will be sacrificial, like the hanged god, and bring change to the land.<sup>235</sup>

The structural motif of the Fisher King not only suggests the destruction of fertility, it also carries the imagery of hope in the possibility of the waste land’s restoration.<sup>236</sup> For the knight to embark on the grail quest there is a belief in the possibility that the king will be healed and regeneration will come to the land. Weston connects these myths of regeneration with the vegetation ceremonies that are seen in a variety of cultures.<sup>237</sup> Eliot explicitly links his poem with these ceremonies when he states in his notes that “anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognise in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies.”<sup>238</sup> Vegetation ceremonies exist within the traditions of cultures which have deep connections to the land and seasonally hold festivals with the aim of increasing fertility. In Spring, vegetation ceremonies involve a character who plays the role of the vegetation deity and, similar to the character of the Fisher King, is a figure who is connected to the virility of the land.<sup>239</sup> Weston describes how at a significant point of the ceremony “the representative of the Spirit of Vegetation is considered as dead, and the object of these ceremonies is to

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<sup>233</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 359-362.

<sup>234</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 147.

<sup>235</sup> Holt, “Hope and Fear,” 26.

<sup>236</sup> Rodgers, “‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’,” 281.

<sup>237</sup> Marc Manganaro, “Mind, Myth, and Culture: Eliot and Anthropology,” in *A Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. David Chinitz (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 79-90, 79.

<sup>238</sup> Manganaro, “Mind, Myth, and Culture,” 79.

<sup>239</sup> Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 55.

restore him to life.”<sup>240</sup> With the restoration to life of the Vegetation Spirit the land is also restored.

Sacrificial death is a regular part of the regenerative process described in these fertility stories. Harriet Davidson identifies in her reading of the fertility myths connected to *The Waste Land* that “a sacrificial death (often a ritual death by water) is necessary for life to continue, is the connection of life and death.”<sup>241</sup> In his anthropological text *The Golden Bough*, Frazer describes the way that “the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially of vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead.”<sup>242</sup> One such story is the myth of Adonis that features sacrificial death and is explicitly mentioned as an influence in Eliot’s notes.<sup>243</sup> The myth of Adonis has roots in the traditions of Babylon and Syria before it became part of Greek worship by 600BCE.<sup>244</sup> Adonis is the beloved of both Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and Persephone, the goddess of death, who fight over him as a youth. Zeus, in an attempt to end the dispute, compels Adonis to spend half the year with each lover so that they will both be satisfied.<sup>245</sup> In the ancient understanding Adonis’s death brings winter, and his resurrection coincides with the beginning of Spring to reflect the seasonal cultic practices of these cultures.

The myth of Adonis, and the vegetation ceremonies which draw from it, contributes to Eliot’s poem a sense of the significance of sacrificial death in the rejuvenation of life and the fear of that possibility. In the final stanza of “The Burial of the Dead” the speaker asks a question to a member of the undead crowd who he recognises from “the ships at Mylae!”<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 119.

<sup>241</sup> Harriet Davidson, “Improper Desire: Reading *The Waste Land*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. A. David Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 121-131, 125.

<sup>242</sup> James Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris I*, vol. 4 of *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed. (London: MacMillan and Co, 1927), 6.

<sup>243</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 147.

<sup>244</sup> Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris I*, 6.

<sup>245</sup> Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris I*, 11.

<sup>246</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 70.

This line alludes to an ancient trade war between Carthage and Rome which Audrey Rodgers compares to World War One.<sup>247</sup> The question is asked whether “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?”<sup>248</sup> The speaker goes on to warn them to “Keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men, / Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!”<sup>249</sup> These lines are a play on the dirge in John Webster’s 1612 play *White Devil* but Eliot exchanges Webster’s “wolf” for “Dog” and “foe” for “friend.”<sup>250</sup> Genevieve Foster interprets the change to “Dog” as an allusion to the dog-star which “heralds the rising of the waters of the Nile and brings fertility to the land.”<sup>251</sup> The speaker presents a contrast between the hope for resurrection in the initial question, and the warning to keep the Dog away which suggests a fear of the rebirth the fertility symbol would produce. This conversation depicts the tension between the desire for regeneration and the reticence of change which is repeatedly addressed through the various vegetation narratives of the poem.

Eliot’s description of Spring suggests a fear of regeneration that echoes throughout the rest of the poem. *The Waste Land* begins with the line “April is the cruellest month,” an allusion to the start of the *Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>252</sup> The negative description of Spring that follows is a contrast to Geoffrey Chaucer’s April where the month is a time for celebration.<sup>253</sup> In his study of repetition in *The Waste Land*, William Spanos observes that the beginning of the poem reveals “the protagonist’s initial dread of confronting the terrible yet mysteriously attractive future, which entails spiritual death but opens up the possibility of rebirth.”<sup>254</sup> Eliot’s poem utilises symbols of rebirth through sacrificial death, yet the beginning

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<sup>247</sup> Rodgers, “‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’,” 290.

<sup>248</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 71-72.

<sup>249</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 74-75.

<sup>250</sup> Rodgers, “‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’,” 291.

<sup>251</sup> Foster, “The Archetypal Imagery of T. S. Eliot,” 572.

<sup>252</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 1; Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>253</sup> Cox, “T. S. Eliot: The Opening Lines of ‘The Burial of the Dead’,” 87.

<sup>254</sup> Spanos, “Repetition in *The Waste Land*,” 245.

of the poem indicates an anxiety about the potential occurrence of this regeneration. The “dead land” of Winter is seen in positive terms in lines four and five: “Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow”.<sup>255</sup> Death, symbolised by Winter, is idealised when contrasted with the changeability and ongoing life of Spring. The use of hanging participles in the opening lines, Davidson notes, freeze the movement of the poem and promote the desire for stability.<sup>256</sup> The repetitive structure of these seven lines slows the beginning of the poem to highlight the speaker’s desire for stasis that Winter, as death, provides.

Spring’s all-encompassing renewal is a source of anxiety that stands against the safety of Winter’s stasis. Desire for constancy, Davidson argues, is thwarted as “nothing transcends the effects of finitude and change brought on by the regeneration of April.”<sup>257</sup> Later in the poem, at the beginning of “The Fire Sermon,” the negative results of change are highlighted in Eliot’s description of the River Thames.<sup>258</sup> Eliot alludes to Edmund Spenser’s “Prothalamion”, published in 1596, to contrast the current state of London with the romantic image that Spenser paints.<sup>259</sup> Spenser’s poem is a wedding song which describes the discovery of two maidens at the River Thames and the nymphs at the river preparing for the maidens’ marriage. The focus of the text is on the beauty of the river and the playfulness the nymphs bring to its surroundings. Eliot employs Spenser’s refrain, “Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song,” used at the end of each of Spenser’s stanzas.<sup>260</sup> Eliot’s reinterpretation of the refrain signals the stark change from the wedding scene that the original poem describes, to the devastation of the Thames in *The Waste Land*.

Eliot’s London is a radically different scene from Spenser’s; “the nymphs are departed” and the earlier poem’s fairy-tale nuptial scene has been turned into an empty

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<sup>255</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 2, ll. 4-5.

<sup>256</sup> Davidson, “Improper Desire,” 126.

<sup>257</sup> Davidson, “Improper Desire,” 123.

<sup>258</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 173-86.

<sup>259</sup> Johnson, ““Broken Images’,” 409.

<sup>260</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 183.



waste.<sup>261</sup> Eliot states that “the river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights.”<sup>262</sup> This dystopian recapitulation of Spenser’s idyllic version of the Thames describes the London in which Eliot now lives. Rubbish functions like architectural ruins which create a remembrance of times past while also displaying the disaster that change has wrought.<sup>263</sup> Johnson argues that Eliot’s use of references to Spenser allows the “real” Thames to be seen through the present Thames that the poem describes and suggests the deterioration that change has brought.<sup>264</sup> Line 182 illustrates the grief that is felt at the loss of the Spenserian idyll.<sup>265</sup> It reads “by the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .”, a rewrite of Psalm 137:1 with particular reference to a lake in Switzerland where Eliot recovered from a nervous breakdown in 1921.<sup>266</sup> The lament of Psalm 137 refers to Babylon and describes the grief of the Israelites in exile as they mourn the loss of Jerusalem. From his own form of exile in Switzerland, Eliot mourns for London, and the myths of the old Thames, as he attempts to recover from the personal grief engendered by his own breakdown, and reflection on what his society has lost.

The desire for regeneration is associated with the fear of change and an idealisation of the comfort of stasis. William Blissett contributes a description of Eliot’s thought on change and stasis as influenced by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus.<sup>267</sup> While few fragments of his work remain, Heraclitus is understood to stress the inevitability of flux and the unrepeatability of any experience in nature.<sup>268</sup> Fragment 12 of his work states: “As they step into the same

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<sup>261</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 175, l. 179.

<sup>262</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 177-9.

<sup>263</sup> Charles Martindale, “Ruins of Rome: T. S. Eliot and the Presence of the Past,” *A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 3 (1995): 102-140, 132.

<sup>264</sup> Johnson, “‘Broken Images’,” 409.

<sup>265</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 182.

<sup>266</sup> Johnson, “‘Broken Images’,” 410.

<sup>267</sup> William Blissett, “T. S. Eliot and Heraclitus,” in *T. S. Eliot and Our Turning World*, ed. Jewel Brooker (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001): 29-46, 37.

<sup>268</sup> T. M. Robinson notes that, while Plato claimed this as central to Heraclitus’s work, the exact analogy is difficult to find among the fragments of his writing that remain. Fragments 12, quoted

rivers, different and [still] different waters flow upon them.”<sup>269</sup> The impossibility of stasis is welcome in the face of the horror of a deathless life. The Sibylline epigraph points to the problem of constant life that is not afflicted by the change that death provides.<sup>270</sup> The multiple images of rivers throughout the poem allude to a Heraclitan philosophy of flux. Most notable is the river Thames that Eliot describes at the beginning of “The Fire Sermon”; the liveliness of the river has moved on.<sup>271</sup> While Blissett stands somewhat alone in his assertion of the influence of Heraclitus on Eliot’s poetry, the elucidation of the motifs of stasis and flux in the poem provides a valuable contribution to images of death and rebirth upon which Eliot draws.<sup>272</sup> Eliot depicts a fear of change in spite of the inevitability of flux which the inhabitants of the waste land face.

The waste land’s relationship to regeneration is one of both fear and longing. Death, and the breakdown of the self that is encompassed by the state of living death, is preferable to the change that would be needed to bring regeneration. The experience of death in the poem is not final, as it creates a form of comfort in the experience of living death, which means that there is no release from the ongoing experience of the waste land. The quest for regeneration becomes, therefore, the central motif in the poem even in spite of the characters’ fear of change.

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below, and 64a suggest the idea but also stress a river’s “unity amidst change.” Regardless, Plato’s version of Heraclitus’s argument has impacted the way that the fragments are read and establishes a reasonable argument for maintaining the Platonic reading as an influence on Eliot. See T. M. Robinson, *Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 83-84.

<sup>269</sup> Robinson, *Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary*, 17.

<sup>270</sup> Rodgers, “‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’,” 281.

<sup>271</sup> Blissett, “T. S. Eliot and Heraclitus,” 38.

<sup>272</sup> Eliot scholarship’s interaction with Heraclitus has largely been limited to attention to the epigraphs to “Burnt Norton” which reference the philosopher directly. See Blissett, “T. S. Eliot and Heraclitus,” 44.

## 4.2 “Death by Water”

The tension between hope for, and fear of, regeneration leads to the ultimate question of the poem: is there the possibility for renewed life or is death the ideal release? Different readings of the poem argue for different answers. Some suggest that the ending of “What the Thunder Said” outlines a vision of hope for restoration in the future, while others claim that there is no redemption offered for the waste land. Eloise Knapp Hay argues that the focus of the poem “is not toward the Fisher King’s desire for renewed life but toward hope for cessation of this cycle of rebirths.”<sup>273</sup> Amidst the interpretive debates, this thesis suggests that Eliot’s description of “death by water” provides a framework for addressing the tension between the two views, with particular interest towards the idea of cessation. The various uses of water and drowning in Eliot’s poem point to an argument for release in some form from the living death that the waste land offers its inhabitants.

Eliot’s use of rain throughout the poem is inconsistent and does not always point to the aridity for which *The Waste Land* is well known. In the first stanza of the poem the speaker states that there is “spring rain” in line 4, but lines 19-30 presents the image of an arid waste land which is reiterated at the end of the poem.<sup>274</sup> In “What the Thunder Said”, the waste land is described in terms of a lack of water which leads to the falling of rain in line 395, and then two lines later the land again “waited for rain”.<sup>275</sup> The final lines of the poem describe the “arid plain,” still dry despite the few instances of rain that have occurred throughout the text. This constant, recurring desire for water shows that while Eliot’s poem is not without rain, the futility of the rain is found in its persistence despite its inability to enact change in a damaged land. The speaker of the water dripping song in “What the Thunder Said” repeatedly states “if there were water” but offers no suggestion of what relief water would provide. Even when the desire for rain is met there is no change and the need returns again. To explain this longing

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<sup>273</sup> Eloise Knapp Hay, *T. S. Eliot’s Negative Way* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 54.

<sup>274</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 4.

<sup>275</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 397.

Davidson states that “the desire for water to relieve the inhuman sterility of the wasteland is explicit, but there seems to be no way to create water from the prison of symbolic enclosure.”<sup>276</sup> The poem’s longing is therefore not for water but for the fertility that rain should bring to the land.

With the restorative function of rain made impotent in the waste land, death by drowning becomes the central possibility for restoration as well as the key fear. Aaron Bibb suggests that the failure of rain shows how “the poem expresses, rather, a deep weariness toward such natural cycles, and is ... pessimistic at best toward any hope of cyclical renewal.”<sup>277</sup> The seasonal changes that rain should bring are feared as they only extend an endless cycle of death rather than provide ultimate renewal. Eliot’s description of cruel spring rain in the first stanza of the poem is contrasted to the first line of Chaucer’s prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* where April’s rain is described as “shoures soote.”<sup>278</sup> Rain, as a symbol of the renewal of the land, is simultaneously cruel and longed for as a possibility of returning vitality and ending the state of death-in-life. Shari Benstock acknowledges the inability of rain to enact true change and suggests that instead “death by drowning is both the central fear and the only real possibility for escape.”<sup>279</sup> The repeated rain in the poem shows that it is impotent to return vitality to the land alone without the sacrifice that death by water can offer.

In order to understand Eliot’s use of drowning in *The Waste Land* it is necessary to elucidate his repeated references to *The Tempest*. The image in the Tarot reading of the “drowned Phoenician Sailor” is connected to Ferdinand’s father in the play by the direct quote in line 48: “(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)”<sup>280</sup> This quotation is taken from Ariel’s song in Act I Scene II where she sings to Ferdinand to convince him of his father’s

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<sup>276</sup> Davidson, *T. S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, 131.

<sup>277</sup> Aaron Bibb, “Death by Water,” in *The Waste Land at 90: A Retrospective*, ed. Joe Moffett (New York: Rodopi, 2011), 73-92, 79.

<sup>278</sup> Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 23.

<sup>279</sup> Benstock, “1922 and After,” 336.

<sup>280</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 48.

death and impel him to go ashore where he meets Miranda. Ariel's song describes the "sea-change" that Alonso undergoes in his death to be transformed "into something rich and strange."<sup>281</sup> According to Sicker the imagery of Ariel's song shows that through drowning there is a "double transformation from life to death and from death back into a state of spiritually purified life."<sup>282</sup> An image of life-giving death like this contextualises Sosostris's warning to "fear death by water" which parallels fears of regeneration at other points in the poem.<sup>283</sup> Holt states that the function of death by water is to provide the speaker with "his need of that spiritual loss of self in baptism" which is feared as it is "the most serious threat to his present mode of being."<sup>284</sup> Ariel's song is used by Eliot to indicate the transformative nature of death by drowning that is feared as change.

Vegetation ceremonies utilise the image of the drowned god as a symbol of the revivifying nature of water. Cleanth Brooks outlines the way that Eliot's use of *The Tempest* describes a death that "becomes a sort of birth."<sup>285</sup> The richness of death by drowning is contrasted with the sterile deaths of the planted corpse at the end of "The Burial of the Dead" and those in "rats' alley".<sup>286</sup> During the conversation in "A Game of Chess" the allusion to Alonso's death is remembered to be juxtaposed against the dead men who have "lost their bones."<sup>287</sup> The forms of death are distinct. Death by water is associated with fertility and enrichment, while other forms of death are unable to create more than a state of living death. This is reminiscent of when the voice who remembers the drowned sailor is asked if he is "alive, or not?"<sup>288</sup> If death by water is restorative then Sosostris's warning to fear it seems

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<sup>281</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Selfridge & Co., 1923), 6.

<sup>282</sup> Sicker, "The Belladonna," 422.

<sup>283</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 55.

<sup>284</sup> Holt, "Hope and Fear," 22.

<sup>285</sup> Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, 149.

<sup>286</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 115.

<sup>287</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 116.

<sup>288</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 126.

appropriate. The characters of the poem have a preference for stasis in spite of the positive change that regeneration could bring. Death by drowning is a counterpart for the infertility of the Fisher King as both vegetation ceremonies display the possibility of enrichment through death.

The shortest section of the poem is “Death by Water”; ten lines that describe the death of “Phlebas the Phoenician”.<sup>289</sup> The regular metre and rhyming pattern of this stanza presents a stark contrast to the images of fire that end and begin the surrounding passages. In the description of Phlebas’s death the speaker states that he, in dying, forgot “the profit and loss” and that he “passed the stages of his age and youth”.<sup>290</sup> His death allows him to forgo these systems which govern the state of living death that the other characters endure.<sup>291</sup> In contrast to the speaker’s observation of the financial district’s commuter’s in “The Burial of the Dead,” Phlebas has escaped from the wider economic obsession with “profit and loss.”<sup>292</sup> Water is his escape from this world and the only possible relief that he could have from it. However, his death does not provide restoration to the waste land as it would in the vegetation ceremonies. When placed in the context of line 328, “he who was living is now dead”, Phlebas’s death seems to be the impetus for the dryness of the waste land.<sup>293</sup> In order for death by drowning to be restorative the drowned god must be resurrected, just as the Fisher King must be healed. Phlebas’s death is a personal release but the decay of fertility myths means that the process cannot be completed, and the waste land is not restored.

Water functions in the poem as both a representation of the hope for regeneration in the land and a force that can bring death. The caution to “fear death by water” establishes the ambiguous value of both death and regeneration; both are hoped for and feared in light of the tension between stasis and change. Phlebas’s death, and subsequent release from the natural

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<sup>289</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 312-321.

<sup>290</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 314, l. 316.

<sup>291</sup> Bibb, “Death by Water,” 85.

<sup>292</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 61-65, l. 314.

<sup>293</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 328.

cycles which plague the waste land's occupants opens the question of the desire for personal salvation over the healing of the waste land that is taken up by the Fisher King in the final stanzas of the poem.

### 4.3 The Benediction of the Fisher King

Any reading of the final stanzas of the poem raises the necessary question of closure. In the wake of the failure of vegetation ceremonies does Eliot offer the waste land any successful system for restoration? Eliot's use of Sanskrit in the ending of the poem implicates Indian mythologies which give commands for living well. However, these statements are ignored as the poem dissolves into disjointed fragments and the Fisher King's desire for death. While some have found it possible to see hope in the last stanzas and a transformation from what came before, this thesis argues that the ending of Eliot's poem indicates an acceptance of what has been lost and a movement towards death rather than renewal. Despair is replaced with peace through the three "Shantih"s, but this peace is not indicative of hope or regeneration for the waste land.

*The Waste Land* closes with an allusion to an Indian legend from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, an ancient text of Hindu teaching. After the sterile rain of line 395, the land continues to wait for rain until the thunder speaks and states "DA" three times, followed by "Datta [give]", "Dayadhvam [sympathise]", and "Damyata [control]" respectively.<sup>294</sup> The speaker responds to these three commands with a statement of how the instructions have been disobeyed, the first most directly with the question "what have we given?"<sup>295</sup> Foster argues that "the questions themselves give a certain clue to the missing value," which she identifies as "a manifestation of human feeling."<sup>296</sup> The inability of the speaker to clearly answer the commands of the thunder illustrates, in Foster's reading of the text, the breakdown of the self's

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<sup>294</sup> These are Eliot's own translations. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 400-422, l. 148.

<sup>295</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 401.

<sup>296</sup> Foster, "The Archetypal Imagery of T. S. Eliot," 575.

responses to emotions. The thunder's commands give a sense of an ideal form of human relationality which has been lost to the increasingly solipsistic self. Give, sympathise, and control are given by the thunder, a symbol of rain, as actions which can restore the state of relationships, and therefore society, and to counteract the ongoing impotence represented in the poem.

The final stanza of *The Waste Land* opens with the voice of the Fisher King who states, "I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?"<sup>297</sup> In Weston's discussion of the Fisher King she analyses different cultural uses of fish motifs to conclude that "there is thus little reason to doubt that, if we regard the Fish as a Divine Life symbol, of immemorial antiquity, we shall not go very far astray."<sup>298</sup> The Fisher King's desire for personal regeneration, and for the restoration of the land, is explicit in his act of fishing, a metaphor for awaiting the appearance of the "Divine Life symbol."<sup>299</sup> As Eliot's character fishes at the end of the poem the question of regeneration remains at the forefront of the text. Can life be restored in the waste land or should the king "set [his] lands in order" to anticipate death?<sup>300</sup>

The Fisher King's acceptance of his situation marks a turn from a concern for the general regeneration of the waste land to a desire for personal redemption. Rather than searching for society's redemption, notes Rodgers, the Fisher King responds to despair by "shoring up his ruins through the cohesive powers of his own poetic imagination, his own self-contained mythically whole world."<sup>301</sup> Rodgers argues that the final stanza of the poem establishes the restorative power of art that shapes relics of the past into "unity-in-contrariety."<sup>302</sup> The experience of fragmentation throughout the poem is explicated by Eliot's

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<sup>297</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 424-426.

<sup>298</sup> Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 127.

<sup>299</sup> Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 127.

<sup>300</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 425.

<sup>301</sup> Rodgers, "'He Do the Police in Different Voices'," 284.

<sup>302</sup> Rodgers, "'He Do the Police in Different Voices'," 284.



claim in this last stanza; instead of accepting ruins, the imaginative power is to reform these fragments to protect against destruction. This form of recollection as protection against ruin suggests that freedom from the dead world is found not in re-entering the natural cycles, but in an articulation of suffering that allows the voice at the end of the poem to speak the final benediction.

The final line of the poem, “Shantih shantih shantih”, forms a meditative benediction that leaves ambiguous the answer to the Fisher King’s question about redemption.<sup>303</sup> “Shantih”, which Eliot translates as “the Peace which passeth understanding,” is traditionally understood as a “verse invocation seeking the blessings of gods and sages in one’s pursuit of spiritual wisdom.”<sup>304</sup> When partnered with *Om* it is a benediction that ends Vedic recitations. K. Narayana Chandran argues that Eliot’s omission of *Om* is intentional and shows that, “distracted and divided, the personages in *The Waste Land* can neither meditate on *Om* nor utter it.”<sup>305</sup> The benedictive power of the chant is broken by the fragmentation of the passage which is indicative of the spiritual disconnection displayed in the rest of the poem. This explanation of “shantih” is compelling in the way that Narayana Chandran sees the final line of the poem as a continuation of the fragmentation in the preceding stanza. Rather than as a statement of peace, “‘shantih’ here is not so much wished as wished for.”<sup>306</sup> Eliot’s use of “shantih” forms a benediction that alludes to the desire for peace in place of a hope for restoration.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot depicts a form of death in life that is the result of an experience of meaningless suffering. The society of the waste land is one where revelation is unintelligible,

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<sup>303</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, l. 433.

<sup>304</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 149.; K. Narayana Chandran, “‘Shantih’ in *The Waste Land*,” *American Literature* 61 (1989): 681-683, 682.

<sup>305</sup> Chandran, “‘Shantih’ in *The Waste Land*,” 683.

<sup>306</sup> Chandran, “‘Shantih’ in *The Waste Land*,” 683.

and the various prophetic voices of the poem are impotent in the face of the breakdown of self experienced by the inhabitants. As a result, the quest for the regeneration of the waste land is futile, with the ambiguous ending of the poem offering a wish for peace rather than a description of hope. The exegesis of Eliot's poem, in a methodology of juxtaposition, offers an opening of theological horizons through the issues of human experience that it raises. Part two of this thesis will elucidate, from a theological perspective, three of the issues of human experience that *The Waste Land* raises.

## **Part 2: Theological Horizons**

Part two of this thesis engages in the second movement of Paul Fiddes's juxtapositional method. The horizon of theology is opened in terms of the elements of human experience that the literary exegesis raises. In light of this reading of T. S. Eliot's poem, this thesis offers a theological engagement with three elements: the breakdown of the self as exemplified through desire, the response to a human experience of tragedy, and an eschatological understanding of restoration.

### **5 Self-Negation and Desire**

This chapter utilises Eliot's depiction of the breakdown of the self to open horizons for a theological exploration of the female experience of self-negation. The loss of self is an important feature of the experience of Eliot's characters in the poem that is heightened by Eliot's allusions to Charles Baudelaire's philosophy of self-alienation. The following chapter explores the way that the female characters of Eliot's poem are self-negated within the sexual relationship rather than self-alienated, lacking an authentic self rather than breaking their relationship with their authentic self. The loss of self expressed by Eliot's female archetype is one where the self is absorbed into the being of the other, and solely exists for the sake of the other. The following chapter argues that the form of self-negation that Eliot depicts in his female characters opens the theological horizon to the critiques made by feminist theologians of dominant, androcentric views of sin as pride. Feminist theologians argue that these androcentric accounts of sin do not often relate to the female experience in the context of patriarchy. Instead, androcentrism, as a result of patriarchy, determines the female subject position as self-negation, which has deleterious impacts on selfhood. This chapter maintains that there are connections between these critiques and Søren Kierkegaard's account of the self which help to elucidate the nature of the relationship between sin and the self. Feminist views of sin offer critiques of the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, whose arguments function similarly to

Baudelaire's philosophy, and emphasise a universal narrative of sin that fails to take account of diverse accounts of human experience.

Sarah Coakley is one important contemporary theologian whose writings' address the issues of sexuality, self, and desire that arise in Eliot's poem, and re-order the self's relationship to God in ways that do not diminish self-determination. The perspective of sin as self-negation leads to a constructive quest for ways in which self-effacing relationships can be reconstituted in terms of desire to allow for a form of *metanoia* that encourages the strengthening of the self through relationship with God. Coakley's work on sexuality and the new vision of asceticism that she develops in light of desire, helps to create a framework where the reordering of the self's relationship to God does not diminish the self's own determination. The giving of the self to God requires that there is a self to give. This chapter examines Kierkegaard's language of devotedness to develop a connection between feminist theological accounts of sin, as connected to *The Waste Land*, and Coakley's asceticism. The relationship between sexual desire and the self is illustrated by the role of desire as a reflection of the divine, and as such the way that the reshaping of these desires can reformulate the self in terms of God rather than the other.

## 5.1 Feminist Accounts of Sin

The breakdown of the self as a result of self-alienation is a central experience of the characters in *The Waste Land*. Eliot develops this view of the self through his image of living death and his references to Baudelaire's poetry which illustrate the French poet's view of personhood. Baudelaire posits a theory of human existence based on the idea that the self can cease to exist as a result of moral inaction. Selfhood, from this perspective, is tied to moral knowledge and actions which together enable the individual's continuing existence through active self-realisation, with the implication that the self can fail to be itself as a result of its actions. Paul Fletcher notes how, in a commentary on Baudelaire's work, philosopher Walter Benjamin ties self-alienation not necessarily to individual actions but to a cultural paradigm shift that results

in a situation where “anything other than the self exists for the self; to be, as it were, consumed for the delight and desire of the subject freed from ties.”<sup>307</sup> Through his description of the breakdown of the self, Baudelaire shows self-fragmentation’s relationship to self-alienation. With the loss of identity through self-alienation comes a change of the relationship between not only the self and other but, as Baudelaire identifies, the self to itself. In such cases, Benjamin suggests, a self’s “self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”<sup>308</sup> Baudelaire’s alienated self is focussed on the narcissistic pursuit of its own desires at the expense of the recognition of the other. The consequences of self-alienation are displayed in *The Waste Land* through the fragmented relationships between the characters and others particularly within the sexual relationship, as illustrated in the earlier discussion of the text.<sup>309</sup>

The moral connections Baudelaire makes between self-alienation and the narcissistic pursuit of one’s own desires are echoed by Niebuhr’s theological accounts of sin. Niebuhr is significant because his work is contemporaneous with Eliot’s, and their reflections on sin offer insight into theological accounts of human experience in this period. Yet, Niebuhr’s hamartiology, which tends to define sin in androcentric terms, is the subject of serious critique by feminist theologians. In *The Irony of American History* Niebuhr claims that the central elements of universal sin are “sloth and pride,” and, in the same way as Baudelaire, suggests that focus on self-interest leads to self-destruction.<sup>310</sup> Niebuhr deploys this view of the self to make universalising claims about the nature of sin; “the fall is not a singular event in the past, but rather describes the situation of every human being.”<sup>311</sup> Hamartiology in Niebuhr’s work,

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<sup>307</sup> Paul Fletcher, “Incognito Ergo Sum: Political Theology and the Metaphysics of Existence,” *New Blackfriars* 82 (2001): 121-131, 124.

<sup>308</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), 235.

<sup>309</sup> See section 3.3.

<sup>310</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), 130.

<sup>311</sup> Ian A. MacFarland, “Original Sin,” in *T&T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin*, eds. Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 303-318, 310.

is closely associated with narcissism and self-alienation in ways which echo the way that Eliot's male characters engage in sexual relationships, such as the typist's lover who reduces his desire to a self-gratifying transaction that does not see the object of his desire.<sup>312</sup> In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr observes the underlying issue of sin within relationships and argues that the human "falls into pride when he seeks to raise his contingent existence to unconditioned significance."<sup>313</sup> That is to say that the self elevates itself over the other, often at the expense of the other's self-realisation. Niebuhr's hamartiology draws on a longstanding tradition which asserts that universal sin in humanity manifests as pride and elevates the self above God in the individual's esteem.

Niebuhr's description of "man's self-glorification" leaves him open to critique by feminist theologians, who hold his hamartiology to be excessively androcentric.<sup>314</sup> The dominant patriarchal narrative of his hamartiology results in privileging understandings of the self that are more common within the male experience. Niebuhr's failure to give account of disparate understandings of the loss of selfhood is surprising given his reliance on Kierkegaard's work, which maintains an account of sin as loss of self in a way that is not limited to the androcentric account of pride. Instead, Niebuhr reduces his account of sin to pride which presupposes a sense of self that can be overinflated. Diedre Green notes that "had Niebuhr incorporated Kierkegaard's dialectic account of despair in his view of sin, Niebuhr could have seen the value in Kierkegaard's views on authentic selfhood and proper self-love, which find deep resonance in the work of feminist theologians like Saiving."<sup>315</sup> This chapter contrasts Kierkegaard's view of the self as it is read by feminist theologians, such as Valerie Saiving, with Niebuhr's androcentric definition to assert an alternative account of self and sin.

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<sup>312</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 215-256.

<sup>313</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, vol. 1 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner's, 1941), 186.

<sup>314</sup> Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 186.

<sup>315</sup> Deidre Green, "A Self That is Not One: Kierkegaard, Niebuhr, and Saiving on the Sin of Selflessness," *The Journal of Religion* 97 (2017): 151-180, 152.

However, it is worth noting that Saiving's initial critique of Niebuhr, in spite of her argument's similarities with Kierkegaard's work, fails to identify Niebuhr's misappropriation of his source material. Rita M. Goss and Jodie Lyon, in their critiques of Niebuhr, claim that Niebuhr's argument about pride suggests an issue of ego that can be aligned with self-negation.<sup>316</sup> Lyon argues that Niebuhr's claims about pride lie at the root of self-effacement as both exemplify the self's choice to self-actualise rather than to seek God's direction.<sup>317</sup> A key connection between the issues of pride and self-negation illustrated by Lyon is that of the loss of selfhood in relation to God. However, the prioritisation of pride still suggests a vision of sin that is limited in its scope of human experience. Niebuhr's emphasis on the sin of pride is the way that he inverts what Kierkegaard sees as a consequence of the inauthentic self to be the cause of fragmented selfhood. Pride is deemed the root of the self's breakdown instead of a manifestation of inauthentic selfhood. There is a devaluing of differing human experiences of the self in Niebuhr's argument, especially that of the female.

The reduction of universal sin to pride faces a variety of important feminist critiques, and, in this regard, Saiving's work is foundational.<sup>318</sup> Saiving argues that Niebuhr does not take into account the differences in male and female experiences of sin. The use of pride as a focal point in this argument assumes an over-inflated sense of self that eclipses the divine and human other. However, Saiving suggests that, due to a patriarchal context, rather than pride it is excessive selflessness that is the root of sin for women and occurs to the extent that her self ceases to exist.<sup>319</sup> While pride may be the original sin for men, for women it is the opposite as their identity is subsumed through devotedness to the other.<sup>320</sup> The norming language of an

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<sup>316</sup> Green, "A Self That is Not One," 159.

<sup>317</sup> Jodie L. Lyon, "Pride and the Symptoms of Sin," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28 (2012): 96-102, 98.

<sup>318</sup> The beginning of feminist critiques of androcentric narratives of sin are often linked to Valerie Saiving's 1960 article "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (1960): 100-112.

<sup>319</sup> Saiving, "The Human Situation," 100.

<sup>320</sup> Saiving, "The Human Situation," 107.

androcentric account of sin, in Elizabeth Johnson's estimation, "alienates the female and nonruling males as deficient, auxiliary, 'other'."<sup>321</sup> Theological androcentrism and religious patriarchy leads to a conditioning of female self-understanding that has both social and psychological effects on the female self.<sup>322</sup> As opposed to an androcentric view of sin, Johnson describes the female experience as a "loss of center, diffuseness of personality, lack of a sense of self leading one to drift or take direction unthinkingly from others."<sup>323</sup> Inflated self-giving rather than inflated ego, leads to a female self that is sinful. Feminist theologians enhance and enlarge Niebuhr's definition of sin as "the failure to live as a human" by the female experience of self-giving.<sup>324</sup> Feminist theology identifies self-negation as another important contributor to the fragmented, and therefore sinful, self that Niebuhr and others miss due to their androcentric fixation on pride.

At the root of feminist critiques of androcentric hamartiology is an acknowledgement of the difference in relationships experienced by men and women between the self and other.<sup>325</sup> In a patriarchal context, a male experience of sin is to seek to dominate the other as a result of prideful conceptions of the self while the female loses her self in pursuit of good for the other. Rosemary Radford Reuther examines this account of the female self in the context of patriarchy and concludes that, due to the conditioning of patriarchal structures, the female self is reliant on relationships with another for its existence.<sup>326</sup> In androcentric accounts of

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<sup>321</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 24.

<sup>322</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 24.

<sup>323</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 102.

<sup>324</sup> Ronald H. Stone, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Feminist Critique of Universal Sin," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28 (2012): 91-96, 94.

<sup>325</sup> It is important to note that while, due to the scope of this thesis, I will focus on feminist narratives of sin, these are also limited in their engagement with universal narratives of sin. Womanist and *mujerista* critiques of both feminist and androcentric theology draw attention to the need for intersectionality to exist within the discipline.

<sup>326</sup> Rosemary Radford Reuther, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Reuther (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 150-183, 156-7.



hamartiology dating back to the patristic period, Reuther maintains that “woman is not really seen as a self-sufficient, whole person with equal honor, as the image of God in her own right, but is seen, ethically, as dangerous to the male.”<sup>327</sup> The framework that Reuther describes is one that ensures that the female self is reliant on the male self for her being, and as such leads to a form of self-negation that dissolves her self fully into the identity of the other. In relationships, the conditioned female tendency is to give so greatly of herself that she has little identity of her own, while the male exerts the dominance that is associated with an over inflation of the ego. Such claims risk essentialising male and female experience to a single typology, both individually and in relationship. However, these distinctions serve to illustrate a dominant, androcentric perspective that has been prioritised in theology, and which feminist theologians identify as an inhibiting factor in the flourishing of the female self.

Eliot’s depiction of female characters in *The Waste Land* supports the categorisation of different gendered experiences of the loss of self. Through the breakdown of the sexual relationship the poem’s male and female archetypes’ express different responses to the fragmentation of self. This distinction emerges most clearly in the relationship between the typist and her lover, an account in which the female is the silent recipient of her lover’s advances. While the character of the typist typifies a form of narcissism, as seen in the use of the mirror motif, it is a self-reflection that occurs at the expense of her lover’s unrecognition of her being. The male character’s pride and dominance reduces the female self to an unspeaking, numb and compliant, recipient of male desire. The typist’s acknowledgement of her own sexual desire is only in relation to her desire to fulfil the needs of her lover, rather than a desire related to her own selfhood.

## 5.2 Devotedness and Desire

Pride and selflessness do not need to form an essentialist gendered sin dichotomy, rather they can both be seen as the outworking of the loss of true selfhood in relation to God and others.

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<sup>327</sup> Reuther, “Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church,” 156-7.

In contrast to Niebuhr, Green highlights the way that “both pride and selflessness are forms of inauthentic self-willing that keep the individual from attaining true selfhood and realizing one’s divinely gifted potential.”<sup>328</sup> She utilises Kierkegaard’s hamartiology from *The Sickness Unto Death* that he develops through his pseudonym Anti-Climacus. Anti-Climacus’s reflections on the nature of sin in the patriarchal context of Christendom outline the forms of male and female sins, and feminist theologians utilise and extend his analysis.<sup>329</sup> According to Green, feminist theologians who address the issue of sin in androcentric theology “make overt what Kierkegaard hints at, namely, that Christendom drives women deeper into despair by misdiagnosing the sickness and consequently prescribing the wrong cure.”<sup>330</sup> Green’s feminist re-reading of Kierkegaard’s work highlights the shortcomings in Niebuhr’s use of Kierkegaard and his androcentric account of sin as pride, which disregards the alternate manifestations of fragmented selfhood that are more common in women’s experiences. Niebuhr’s selective appropriation of Kierkegaard results in a universalising of male experience and a lack of reflection on the female experience as it is identified by feminist theologians.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard claims that the root of universal sin is the loss of authentic selfhood. Anti-Climacus defines sin in this book as a “despair to will to be oneself,” which Green paraphrases as “any self-manifestation or assertion that impedes God’s assistance to my becoming as an authentic self.”<sup>331</sup> Sin and despair are linked in Kierkegaard’s thought, and he maintains that the individual is “furthest from being conscious of himself as spirit when he is ignorant of being in despair.”<sup>332</sup> The task of the self, in order to move out of

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<sup>328</sup> Green, “A Self That is Not One,” 159.

<sup>329</sup> Green, “A Self That is Not One,” 153.

<sup>330</sup> Green, “A Self That is Not One,” 163.

<sup>331</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. and eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 165; Green, “A Self That is Not One,” 162.

<sup>332</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 44.

sin, is to replace this despair with the love of the self so as to “bring love along with oneself.”<sup>333</sup> It is through self-acknowledgement and self-love, Kierkegaard argues, that the individual is able to become an authentic self. The root of this love is not pride, rather it is found through a realisation of the love of God in the self. Excessive self-regard and fear of self-love are both over focussed on the self, and as Green highlights, they have deleterious impacts on true Christian love. Green shows how “Kierkegaard indicates that a fear of loving oneself is just as problematic as inordinate self-regard and that both extremes manifest an undue attention on the self, which counters true Christian love.”<sup>334</sup> Universal sin is, in Kierkegaard’s definition, a failure of the human to be an authentic self, either through pride or self-negation. Such a definition informs a view of sin that allows for different gendered expressions without the essential nature of sin being gendered.

A particularly female manifestation of sin that Kierkegaard suggests is “devotedness” to the other, which gives insight into the relationship between self-negation and desire. The woman, Anti-Climacus states, “abandons herself, throws her self into that to which she devotes herself. Take this devotion away, then her self is also gone.”<sup>335</sup> The self that is devoted to the wellbeing of another ceases to have an existence of its own and is therefore unable to achieve the self realisation that is found in relationship with God. The despair to be oneself is identified by Anti-Climacus as the “one unique quality that woman has.”<sup>336</sup> From the perspective of contemporary feminism, Kierkegaard’s language and universalising account of the female self must be challenged as instead a conditioned behaviour resulting from the dominant patriarchal narrative. Green objects to the language used by the speaker in the text

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<sup>333</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. and eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 157.

<sup>334</sup> Green, “A Self That is Not One,” 162.

<sup>335</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 50.

<sup>336</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 50.

but maintains that the issue of self-negating devotedness is the root of a female experience of sin.<sup>337</sup>

The similarities between Kierkegaard's work and feminist visions of female experience are key to understanding feminist critiques of Niebuhr. Female devotedness, Saiving avers, is an "underdevelopment or negation of the self."<sup>338</sup> Similarly, Green utilises Kierkegaard, in a way that Saiving does not, to describe the way that "a woman abandons herself in devotion to the object of love to the extent that if she loses the object of love, she loses herself along with it."<sup>339</sup> In her analysis of Saiving's work, Wanda Warren Berry holds that Saiving's lack of connections to Kierkegaard misses the extent of his dual definition of sin, in the same way as Niebuhr and many other modern theologians.<sup>340</sup> Whatever the use of Kierkegaard, many feminist theologians identify the same issue of devotedness as Kierkegaard does and use this language to outline an explicitly female account of sinfulness through the fragmentation of authentic selfhood.

One of the consequences of the failure to acknowledge the potential gendered differences in relation to sin as pride is the expectation for *metanoia* that pride impels. Dominant Christian accounts of redemption often focus on the modes of self-giving love and devotion as central to a Christian posture. Susan Nelson Dunfee describes the central female sin as the "sin of hiding," which she connects to the way that Christianity can both contribute to a woman's guilt and fail to "call her into her full humanity."<sup>341</sup> If women's sin is, as Dunfee articulates, "not the overexaltation of the self and pride but the failure under pressure to adequately develop the strengths of the self," then a Christian focus on self-sacrificial love in

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<sup>337</sup> Green, "A Self That is Not One," 154.

<sup>338</sup> Saiving, "The Human Situation," 100.

<sup>339</sup> Green, "A Self That is Not One," 154.

<sup>340</sup> Wanda Warren Berry, "Images of Sin and Salvation in Feminist Theology," *Anglican Theological Review* 6 (1978): 25-54, 45-46.

<sup>341</sup> Susan Nelson Dunfee, "The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's Account of the Sin of Pride," *Soundings* 65 (1982): 316-327, 321-22, 317.

not the antithesis of sin but part of the cause.<sup>342</sup> Women, whose selves are already diminished through excessive relational self-giving, are extolled to give further of the self in order to live an idealised Christian life. The failure to recognise the consequences of an androcentric perspective of sin for the female self does not essentialise the female self. Rather, it depicts the way these sin responses are taught through the dominant, patriarchal narrative that encourages women, in particular, into self-negating roles in relationships. As Ronald H. Stone claims, feminist scholars like Dunfee are not necessarily arguing for an essentialist view of gendered sin, rather their suggestion is that women are “unfree by nature because the prevalence of patriarchy reduces the human self toward negativity.”<sup>343</sup> The androcentric impulse of the church’s patriarchal cultural ideas encourages a self-sacrificial response to sin, which, when enacted in tandem with women’s conditioned response of self-negation, amplifies the loss of the self that the female already experiences.

In place of self-denial and self-loss, Ruether instead calls for a *metanoia* that “involves a turning around in which they literally discover themselves as persons, as centers of being upon which they can stand and build their own identity.”<sup>344</sup> *Metanoia*, according to Ruether, relies on the need for the female self to be found, in order that it can then be given in self-sacrificial love as called by God. In this sense, authentic selfhood is a necessary prerequisite to enable females to live out the call of selflessness. The call to selflessness that the church often prescribes, what Judith Plaskow calls the “love ideal,” contributes to self-negation and the loss of self under the conditions of patriarchy.<sup>345</sup> The love ideal, Plaskow argues “is irrelevant to or in conflict with her becoming a person.”<sup>346</sup> Contrary to the impulses and outcomes of self-negation, the ability to self-sacrifice is limited without a clear sense of self.

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<sup>342</sup> Stone, “Reinhold Niebuhr and the Feminist Critique of Universal Sin,” 93.

<sup>343</sup> Stone, “Reinhold Niebuhr and the Feminist Critique of Universal Sin,” 94.

<sup>344</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 186.

<sup>345</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women’s Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), 87.

<sup>346</sup> Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*, 87.

Instead, the turn to the self allows true selfhood to occur through God and to give way to desire for and devotedness to the divine.

Feminist theologians offer, in their critiques of androcentric narratives, a wider vision of sin that highlights the conditioned response of self-negation that is prominent in the female experience. Instead, in continuity with Kierkegaard, they reframe a female account of hamartiology as a loss of authentic selfhood. The following section examines Coakley's account of disordered desire to offer a constructive description of selfhood in devotion to God that does not result in a giving away of the self. The reordering of desire from self-negating devotion to the other to devotedness to God allows for the individual to realise their selfhood in relationship to the divine.

### **5.3 Sexuality and Selfhood**

In *The Waste Land* Eliot illustrates a connection between self-negation and the breakdown of the sexual relationship through his female characters, in particular the character of the typist. The female negated self in the sexual relationship ceases to exist within the desire of the other, in the same way that devotedness is described in Kierkegaard's work. Eliot depicts the breakdown of the sexual relationship within the broader context of the loss of meaning that is described in the poem. Questions of the ordering of desire are central to Coakley's theological exploration of the nature of authentic selfhood and the relationship between the self and God, and her work provides an important theological contribution to desire and selfhood. In Kierkegaardian fashion, Coakley identifies a connection between the redirection of desire towards God and the reshaping of the self; devotedness must be shifted from the other to the divine. This section explores the constructive possibilities in Coakley's new asceticism that highlight the centrality of God within human desire in order that the self may become fully what God intends it to be.

The connection between sexual relationships and our relationship to the divine is intrinsic to the reorientation of desire that enables the fulfillment of the self. Michel Foucault

argues that in the modern period sexuality became secularized “in the sense that human intercourse was disengaged from religion; the norm that upheld the relation between intercourse and religion – not only Christianity – was dissolved.”<sup>347</sup> Desire is disconnected from the religious categories in which it is bounded and is reclassified as individual desires and desire for the divine. Eliot captures a sense of this separation in the way that the sexual relationships within *The Waste Land* are fragmented, and how this is presented as a consequence of the wider loss of meaning expressed in the poem. The relationship that is described in “A Game of Chess” is one that depicts the breakdown of relationships through the inability of the couple to communicate.<sup>348</sup> Inherent in the description of the separation of sexual desire from divine desire, Coakley argues, is the presupposition that the two objects of desire are connected. The “profound entanglement of our human sexual desires and our desire for God” is, Coakley claims, the cause of the conflict within Christianity around wider issues of sexuality.<sup>349</sup> Coakley’s theological contention is that sexual desire and faith cannot be separated due to the inherent connections that exist between sexuality and God, and in particular the correlations between the nature of desire as expressed in both sexual desire and faith.

There is an intrinsic link between sexual and divine desire, and Coakley maintains that desire is the most basic of human drives. In *The New Asceticism*, Coakley describes how desire “allures us, liberates us, gives us the energy and ecstasy of participation in the divine life, makes us humans ‘fully alive’ for whom nothing in the created world – as also in the divine compassion – can be ‘alienated’ from the same God of love.”<sup>350</sup> Sexual desire is in this sense a reflection of the wider purpose of human desire that impels the self towards the divine.

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<sup>347</sup> Ola Sigurdson, “Desire and Love,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 523-537, 525.

<sup>348</sup> See section 3.3; Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 111-138.

<sup>349</sup> Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 86.

<sup>350</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 10.

Coakley expands on this view of desire in *God, Sex, and the Self*, and she states that “it is God who is basic, and ‘desire’ the precious clue that ever tugs at the heart, reminding the human soul – however dimly – of its created source.”<sup>351</sup> At the root of Coakley’s argument is the presupposition that “*desire is more fundamental than ‘sex’*” and in sexual relationships it is necessary to consider first what is reflected by the nature of desire.<sup>352</sup> In opposition to Sigmund Freud’s strand of sexology, Coakley argues that “instead of ‘God’ language ‘really’ being about sex, sex is really about God – the potent reminder woven into our earthly existence of the divine ‘unity’, ‘alliance’, and ‘commingling’ that we seek.”<sup>353</sup> Sex is inextricably connected to the human experience of the divine through the way that desire and selfhood functions, with the result of the misdirection of either being the breakdown of authentic selfhood.

Coakley’s theological account of desire is established through trinitarian reflection, with particular interest in the trinitarian theology of Augustine, Dionysius, and Gregory of Nyssa. Coakley examines the patristics’ arguments on gender, and holds that their “views on sexual relationships were in important senses *part and parcel* of their trinitarian constructions, analogically speaking.”<sup>354</sup> The trinitarian reflections of Gregory and Augustine, have implications for the way that they understand sexuality and gender, and this shapes their perception of divine desire.<sup>355</sup> There is an “analogical alignment of sexual desire and desire for God,” as desire is a necessary part of the human response.<sup>356</sup> The analogy between desire for the divine and human sexual desire begins for Coakley with an exposition of the nature of relationships within the Trinity.

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<sup>351</sup> Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10.

<sup>352</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 10.

<sup>353</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 316.

<sup>354</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 310.

<sup>355</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 266.

<sup>356</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 295.



In contrast to Augustine and Gregory, and in keeping with the Nicene spirit, Coakley resists a hierarchical vision of the Trinity based on gender, but she does maintain the sense of a hierarchical need to orient desire towards God.<sup>357</sup> Regarding the inner relations of the Trinity, Coakley affirms the “Spirit’s mutual infusion *in* Son and Father.”<sup>358</sup> As a reflection of desire, the “divine ‘processions’ cannot ... ever be about *patriarchal* hierarchy” as instead they reflect “the perfect mutual ontological desire that only the Godhead instantiates.”<sup>359</sup> Coakley is critical of trinitarian reflections that draw clear analogies between the divine and the human as a form of projectionism. There is a distinct qualitative difference between the desires that Coakley describes; the Spirit causes desire for the divine in humanity – which is analogous to human sexual desire – but the desire for the divine does not function in the same way as the inner relations of the Trinity.<sup>360</sup> The interrelationship of the Trinity is the source of Coakley’s vision of divine desire, one that affirms the primacy of desire for the divine, and its analogical connection to sexual desire.

The intrinsic links between sexual desire and the desire for the divine are revealed as a connection between authentic selfhood and God. Sex and selfhood are linked, according to Coakley, and “desire, on this view, is the constellating category of selfhood, the ineradicable root of the human longing for God.”<sup>361</sup> Drawing on the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, Coakley develops a notion of *divine ekstasis* that suggests the interrelation between the self in relationship to God and divine desire. While Dionysius does not explicitly draw the link that Coakley makes between divine and sexual desire, Coakley argues that “the protoerotic dimension for him *is* divine.”<sup>362</sup> Coakley shows that Dionysius attributes ecstatic yearning to human relationships to the divine in a way that reflects the “*divine* love of creation.”<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 321.

<sup>358</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 332.

<sup>359</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 333.

<sup>360</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 334.

<sup>361</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 26.

<sup>362</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 313.

<sup>363</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 314.

*Ekstasis* is, therefore, a flow of divine desire that moves cyclically from God to creation and is then returned to the divine.<sup>364</sup> However, the idea of the flow of divine *ekstasis* has implications for not only the relationship between human and divine, but reflections can also be drawn for ecstatic love between humans. A sense of participation in the divine life is captured in what is not an emulation of divine *ekstasis*, by an calling of the Spirit to union in a way that maintains the ontological distinction of Creator and creature “in their new ecstasy of exchange.”<sup>365</sup> *Ekstasis* as a mode of comparison between divine desire and human sexual desire encourages a relational mutuality that honours the selfhood of the other through “ecstatic participation in the Spirit.”<sup>366</sup>

Coakley’s trinitarian connections between selfhood, desire, and God stand out in the discourse on sexual desire. In his discussion of desire and love, Ola Sigurdson claims that “to a pre-modern lover, it was more or less self-evident that the *telos* of desire could not be found in any human being, but only in God.”<sup>367</sup> In light of the changes emerging from modernity, Sigurdson argues that there is a “shortening of the eschatological horizon of desire” that limits the connection between sexual desire and the divine.<sup>368</sup> Sexual desire, as Coakley argues, is “really about God, and about the deep desire that we feel for God – the precious clue that is woven into our existence about the final and ultimate union that we seek.”<sup>369</sup> The connection between sexual desire and desire for God illustrates the way that authentic selfhood relies on relationship with God. Desire, as a basic drive of the self, impacts the ability of the self to relate to the other and to therefore become fully realised. When desire is aligned in terms of the relationship between sexual desire and God, the individual reflects the divine desire within these relationships. Coakley states that “if human loves are indeed made with the imprint of

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<sup>364</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 315.

<sup>365</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 318.

<sup>366</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 322.

<sup>367</sup> Sigurdson, “Desire and Love,” 525.

<sup>368</sup> Sigurdson, “Desire and Love,” 525.

<sup>369</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 96.

the divine upon them – *vestigia* of God’s ways – then they too, at their best, will surely bear the trinitarian mark.”<sup>370</sup> Desire for God is intertwined with sexual desire, which illustrates a connection between selfhood and sex.

Desire must be reoriented to account for the reflection of desire for the divine that it entails so that authentic selfhood can be achieved. This reorientation aligns with Kierkegaard’s argument that devotedness be focussed on God in order that the individual may find their true self. Coakley argues that “with a profound allure that is hard completely to suppress or deny even within a ‘secular’ society, desire is no less that which continuously animates us to God.”<sup>371</sup> Desire that can be directed towards God needs to be reshaped by the “right ‘channelling’ of *eros*,” that is to say that desire must be reordered towards the divine for a “spiritual unification of desire towards God.”<sup>372</sup> A vision of divine desire is necessary, in Coakley’s view, to provide “the guiding framework for a renewed theology of human sexuality – of godly sexual relations – rooted in and *in some sense* analogously related to, trinitarian divine relations.”<sup>373</sup> The comprehension of the self’s relation to and desire for the divine helps to reshape the nature of the sexual relationship that bears negatively on the self’s identity. As the self is impelled by divine desire, it becomes more authentically as it was intended to be, and as such is not negated by the relationship to the other. Devotedness to God allows the self to become itself, therefore when sexual desire is a reflection of this trinitarian desire the self is no longer negated by the other.

Due to the identified connection between sexual desire and the divine, Coakley calls for a contemplative reshaping of desire that will help to formulate the self in relation to God. Coakley describes this contemplative encounter as a new asceticism, which will “include an often painful submission to other demanding tests of ascetic transformation – through fidelity

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<sup>370</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 97

<sup>371</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 10.

<sup>372</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 50.

<sup>373</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 87.

to divine desire, and thence through fidelity to those whom we love in this world.”<sup>374</sup> This ascetic transformation requires a “Christological transformation” as “no one can simply move from earthly, physical love (tainted as it so often is by sin and misdirection of desire) to divine love.”<sup>375</sup> Through contemplative practices, Coakley argues that a reordering of the passions through the action of the Spirit can be achieved so that the self can be found in the act of participation with God.<sup>376</sup> The transformation that Coakley elucidates is one that is reliant on the relationship between sexual desire and desire for God, as sexual desire is reshaped through the redirecting of desire to the divine. The self is found through devotedness to God and the relinquishing of wrongly ordered desire so that the direction of divine desire can shape the self.

Devotedness to God, however, does not result in the form of self-negation that devotedness to the other does. While Coakley advocates “a vision of selfhood reconstituted participatorily in the triune God, in such a way that misdirected desire (sin and blindness) is radically purged and chastened,” this vision is participatory, not in exclusion of the self.<sup>377</sup> In *Powers and Submissions*, Coakley addresses the issue of self-negation by identifying that “‘self-emptying’ is not a negation of self, but the place of the self’s transformation and expansion into God.”<sup>378</sup> The danger of self-negation that Coakley acknowledges is shown as she outlines the distinction between “this contemplative ‘self-effacement’ and self-destruction or self-repression.”<sup>379</sup> As the earlier discussion of feminist critiques shows the danger of Christian impulses towards self-giving love, Coakley acknowledges the concerns around *kenōsis* but asserts that contemplative practices of the reordering of desire allow for “an

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<sup>374</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 310.

<sup>375</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 316.

<sup>376</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 342.

<sup>377</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 26.

<sup>378</sup> Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 36.

<sup>379</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 36-7.

expanded view of the self rooted in the trinitarian God.”<sup>380</sup> Unlike the self-negating devotion to the other that results from misplaced sexual desire, the redirection of desire towards the divine allows the individual to participate, through an abandonment of the ego, in the selfhood that is available through relationship with the divine.

## 5.4 Conclusion

Eliot’s depiction of the fragmentation of the self in *The Waste Land* opens horizons on female selfhood and self-negation which feminist theologians explore in their hamartiologies. Disordered desire, as defined by Coakley, and the issue of devotedness relates to self-negation and provides a further theological horizon in the poem. The portrayal of sexual relationships within *The Waste Land* frames the relational consequences of the breakdown of the self impelled by the experience of living-death. This chapter has shown that Coakley offers a constructive theological response through her account of contemplative practices that reframe misdirected desire through a trinitarian account of desire. This direction of desire towards God allows for the ongoing realisation of authentic selfhood that is rooted in the trinitarian God.

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<sup>380</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submission*, 36-9; Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 342.

## 6 Tragedy and a Theology of Suffering

T. S. Eliot's poem outlines the human experience of suffering in the face of death and a loss of meaning and purpose. The characters in *The Waste Land* experience living death, an existential state where both life and death exist simultaneously due to the meaninglessness of their situation and the suffering that they endure. The world of Eliot's poem is one in which losses, of life and purpose, seem to be final despite the continuing allusions to the desire for resolution. This chapter examines the horizon Eliot's poem opens on the human experience of suffering and meaninglessness and draws it into conversation with the field of tragic theology, especially the work of Donald MacKinnon. MacKinnon's focus on the relationship between tragedy and hope draws connections between the genre of tragic writing and wider theological arguments on the role of meaningless suffering in the human experience. In this thesis, meaningless suffering refers to the forms of tragic experience that, like those outlined in *The Waste Land*, defy attempts to discern meaningful outcomes as a result of the pain that is endured.

MacKinnon's perspectives on atonement and the acknowledgement of tragedy are integral to a necessary theological realism that accounts for all of human experience. In light of MacKinnon's questions of God's place in tragedy, it is possible to develop a theology that responds constructively to tragic experience and does not ignore tragic realities in the depiction of the restorative nature of Christian hope. In conjunction with MacKinnon, this chapter draws from Karen Kilby's appeal for greater apophaticism and "bafflement" in the face of tragedy that provides necessary limits for theological meaning-making about meaningless suffering. Kilby's apophaticism coincides with Eliot's depictions of silence before tragic suffering as a realistic response to tragedy. Taken together, MacKinnon's demand for tragic theology alongside Kilby's appeal for apophaticism before suffering offer an account of the relationship between tragedy and Christian hope that does not devalue the human experience of suffering.

## 6.1 Tragic Suffering

MacKinnon holds that there is no disjuncture between Christian accounts of hope and depictions of tragedy and insists that the two work in tandem within an adequate Christian account of human experience. MacKinnon's argument centres on the thesis that tragedy is a paradigm within theological thought that allows for the reshaping of Christianity's relationship to suffering.<sup>381</sup> Tragedy is tied to the crucifixion for MacKinnon which illustrates, as Giles Waller explains, the "roughest edges of human experience."<sup>382</sup> Rather than an antithesis to Christian hope, tragedy is defined by Waller and Kevin Taylor as an "aid in the development of a theology that does justice to the realities and power of sin, suffering and evil."<sup>383</sup> Theologies that highlight the importance of remembering tragic realities of human experience create realistic images of the nature of human existence. The inclusion of a tragic perspective within the theological narrative of hope pushes for what Rowan Williams describes as "a resolution that embraces the narrating of what cannot be mended – rather than a resolution which explains and so nullifies the tangles and injuries of what has been done or suffered."<sup>384</sup> Christian conversation about hope would be incomplete without the reality of human experience that tragic theology is at pains to reconcile with the ongoing work of Christ. Far from being incompatible with the discipline, tragedy is necessary to a theological approach that seeks to engage with a holistic human experience of the world.

The study of narrative tragedy contributes to theological reflections that deal realistically with the nature of human suffering. In particular, tragic literature highlights the

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<sup>381</sup> Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 135.

<sup>382</sup> Giles Waller, "Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon's Use of Tragedy," in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, eds. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Surrey: Routledge, 2011), 101-118, 103.

<sup>383</sup> Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller, "Introduction," in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, eds. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (Surrey: Routledge, 2011), 1-11, 6.

<sup>384</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 114.

realities of the human experience in a way that cannot be ignored by quick theological recourses to hope. MacKinnon argues for interdisciplinary theological engagement with literature because one finds in literary tragedy “the remorseless determination not to fudge with the intractable, surd element in human life, but to lay it bare as it is, no false consolation sought, no make-believe refuge found.”<sup>385</sup> The way in which literature engages with tragedy can be utilised as a mode to interpret the greater picture of human experience. Tragic readings of the problem of suffering teach about its insolvability, “a lesson which Christian faith abundantly confirms, even while it transforms the teaching by the indication of its central mystery.”<sup>386</sup> Christianity’s continual need to navigate the boundaries of these two seemingly contrasting ideas, unreconciled suffering and restoration, is facilitated through engagement with tragic literature. On the one hand there is the question of the sort of absolution that can be found in light of human tragedy, while on the other the insistent hope that propels beyond despair.<sup>387</sup>

In order to capture the potential barriers between tragedy and Christian hope MacKinnon uses the frame of atonement rather than redemption to consider Christ’s work. Atonement can only be understood in terms of the tragedy that Christ suffered, not in spite of it. MacKinnon warns against a vision of atonement that figures the resurrection as “in effect a descent from the Cross, given greater dramatic effect by a thirty-six hour postponement.”<sup>388</sup> A doctrine of atonement fails if it omits a representation of the “reality of Christ’s failure” in his historical ministry and crucifixion.<sup>389</sup> The assertion of the tragedy of the atonement, the failure and momentary triumph of evil, captures the true sense of the devastation of the cross. Atonement cannot be understood aside from the centrality of tragic sacrifice. Such a tragic

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<sup>385</sup> Donald MacKinnon, “Theology as a Discipline of a Modern University,” in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: A Donald MacKinnon Reader*, ed. John McDowell (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 1-10, 6.

<sup>386</sup> MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 104.

<sup>387</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 102-103.

<sup>388</sup> MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 100.

<sup>389</sup> MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 103.



account of Christ's atonement stands in contrast to other theological accounts of atonement that prioritise the vision of Christ's victory with little to no consideration of the failure of his ministry that first occurred.<sup>390</sup>

MacKinnon's tragic theology is dependent on the way he represents the atoning work of Christ in a theology of the cross. He argues that John's gospel "tells the story of Christ's passion with the fullest possible use of tragic irony."<sup>391</sup> In his victory Christ bears the full burden of the cross and does not submit to "the trick of bloodless victory."<sup>392</sup> By asserting the agony and tragedy of the cross, MacKinnon holds that Christ's resurrection victory exists in the context of the tragedy of Good Friday and this context needs to be understood without the "brightness of the Easter Dawn."<sup>393</sup> The tragedy of the cross is found in Christ's unflinching obedience to facing the suffering set before him, and the perceived failure that the crucifixion marks for those who have entrusted him.<sup>394</sup> Christ dies powerless and "is laid in the tomb, becoming 'pure pastness,' living only in the memory of those who had known his comradeship."<sup>395</sup> The acknowledgement of the perceived failure of Christ's crucifixion and the tragic suffering that he endures in order to achieve victory results in a theology that asserts the significance of the tragic reality.

Discussions of redemption have a significant bearing on the way that tragedy can be theological understood. MacKinnon suggests that in a theology that focusses on redemption and restoration, "the mystery of God's presence in human existence is diminished through induced forgetfulness of the depth to which he descended."<sup>396</sup> A theological focus on

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<sup>390</sup> MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 98.

<sup>391</sup> MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 91.

<sup>392</sup> MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 93.

<sup>393</sup> Donald MacKinnon, "The Tomb was Empty," in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: A Donald MacKinnon Reader*, ed. John McDowell (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 255-260, 255.

<sup>394</sup> MacKinnon, "The Tomb was Empty," 256.

<sup>395</sup> MacKinnon, "The Tomb was Empty," 256.

<sup>396</sup> MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 103-104,

redemption rather than atonement removes the element of human agency that is necessary both within theories of atonement and in tragic narratives. Redemption, in MacKinnon's view, leaves scope for an omission of the work of Christ's humanity as "we can say that redemption could be achieved by a *deus ex machina*: intervening to deliver."<sup>397</sup> What is given is a depiction of "deliverance from all evil" that is the work of God alone, at the expense of an acknowledgement of the human agency that is embodied in the incarnate Christ.<sup>398</sup> With the example of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, MacKinnon describes the divine agency that is upheld by language of redemption. Accounts of redemption can easily encapsulate the eschatological hope of Christianity but in doing so they risk trivialising the nature of the tragic suffering of Christ on the cross and his incarnate human life.

A description of the work of Christ must do justice, according to MacKinnon, to the "deepest contradictions of human life, those contradictions which writers of tragedy have not hesitated to recognize, and to recognize without the distorting consolation of belief in a happy ending."<sup>399</sup> Without a recognition of the tragic nature of the crucifixion the full nature of Christ's atoning work is diminished. A focus on atonement stresses Christ's human agency and his active bearing of tragedy which invites theological reflection on "the world whose ambivalence tragic drama has often explored."<sup>400</sup> It is this engagement with tragedy offered by the atonement that allows Christianity to speak profoundly into the realm of tragic experiences. MacKinnon writes that "Christianity can provide men with a faith through which they are enabled to hold steadfastly to the significance of the tragic."<sup>401</sup> In the atonement, God does not shy away from the realities of human suffering to divinely enact a distant redemption. Instead, through Christ, God enters into tragedy and offers resolution without denial of the

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<sup>397</sup> Donald MacKinnon, "Subjective and Objective Conceptions of Atonement," in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: A Donald MacKinnon Reader*, ed. John McDowell (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 289-300, 289.

<sup>398</sup> MacKinnon, "Subjective and Objective Conceptions of Atonement," 290.

<sup>399</sup> MacKinnon, "Subjective and Objective Conceptions of Atonement," 291.

<sup>400</sup> MacKinnon, "Subjective and Objective Conceptions of Atonement," 291.

<sup>401</sup> MacKinnon, *Problem of Metaphysics*, 135.

tragic suffering. This response to tragedy is a form of healing without cure and, as Williams writes, “tragic representation in this perspective is what represents extreme pain and moral disaster neither as inevitable nor as curable.”<sup>402</sup> The intention of tragic theology is to offer an approach to suffering in light of Christ’s atoning work which ultimately achieves resolution in but not at the expense of acknowledging the suffering that did occur.

Critics of tragic theologians suggest that a focus on tragedy, rather than showing the narrative arc of human history, highlights suffering at the expense of a wider picture of human hope. In this framework the constancy and inevitability of tragedy is equated with an unalterable human condition that leads to a picture of a world that is incapable of change. The waste that Eliot depicts is called to mind: a world that does not seem able to be restored and where suffering is ongoing. A key part of the tragedy of Eliot’s poem is the inescapable nature of the suffering endured by the waste land’s inhabitants regardless of the choices they make; as an example, the Fisher King cannot be healed even if the quest were completed.<sup>403</sup> John Milbank critiques this form of tragedy being privileged in theology and he suggests that MacKinnon’s view of tragedy implies its inevitability.<sup>404</sup> Any suggestion of the inevitability of tragedy would, in Milbank’s view, deny the centrality of hope to the Christian narrative in a way that ignores the narrative as a whole.<sup>405</sup> With a view of a Christian metanarrative that tends towards hope there are concerns that tragic theology suggests suffering is unavoidable.

However, the inevitability of suffering in tragedy does not cause an implicit denial of the greater narrative in Christianity. The intention of tragic theology is a reflection on the unavoidable nature of suffering that occurs in the human story regardless of the picture of hope that Christ provides. In defence of readings of tragic narratives, Williams suggests that MacKinnon’s view “is an attempt to empty out the very idea of a plot, a sequence of narrated

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<sup>402</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 118.

<sup>403</sup> See section 4.1.

<sup>404</sup> John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 22.

<sup>405</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 110.

events in which change occurs.”<sup>406</sup> This is not a denial of the possibility for eschatological hope but instead an acknowledgement of pain in itself so that it is not constrained to the narrative sequence. Tragedy is prioritised in this account rather than the story of the tragic. In response to Milbank, Williams argues that the concern of tragic theology is not to deny the possibility of resolution “but whether we can craft or imagine a resolution that embraces the narrating of what cannot be mended – rather than a resolution which explains and so nullifies the tangles and injuries of what has been done or suffered.”<sup>407</sup> The narrative ends of tragic theology is an assertion that what has been suffered should not be ignored in the expression of a future hope in the larger narrative.

It is sometimes perceived that there is an inherent conflict between the significance of tragedy and the nature of Christian hope. From this perspective, theological accounts of eschatological hope stand in tension with a need for realistic Christian engagement with the tragedy of everyday life, as is represented in tragic forms of literature. Christianity’s emphasis on divine redemption can result in a tendency to trivialise tragic circumstances due to the certainty of hope in the Gospel message. Waller and Taylor note the assumptions often made about the relationship between Christianity and tragedy particularly by literary theorists.<sup>408</sup> A Christian view that is narrowly focussed on the hope of redemption too quickly replaces despair with an escape from earthly suffering, and creates an impassable barrier between hope and an appreciation for the truly tragic. By contrast, Waller and Taylor argue that these views are easily entrenched but they rely on a “hypostasized notion of the ‘tragic’” and a one dimensional view of Christian faith.<sup>409</sup> Any suggestion that Christianity is irreconcilably at odds with tragedy promotes a false dichotomy between tragedy and redemption that creates limitations around theology’s ability to speak productively in tragic circumstances.

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<sup>406</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 110.

<sup>407</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 114.

<sup>408</sup> Taylor and Waller, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>409</sup> Taylor and Waller, “Introduction,” 1.

Theologians who oppose the study of tragedy within the field of theology hold concerns that there exists a contradiction between theology and tragedy. Williams notes the arguments of Milbank and David Bentley Hart who critique MacKinnon's suggestion that tragedy is integral to a holistic theology.<sup>410</sup> The focus of Milbank's argument is on his perception of the inability of MacKinnon's theory to lead to any form of resolution. The result of MacKinnon's theory of atonement, Milbank suggests, is that "the meaning of the resurrection tends to be limited to a corroboration of the fact that God is the God who is with us in our suffering – the unlimited God who yet enters fully into our (tragic) limits, without mitigating them."<sup>411</sup> He claims that MacKinnon's work does not have sufficient scope for hopefulness and restoration due to his merging of the resurrection and the crucifixion. The concern for Milbank is that MacKinnon's theory "occasions a kind of *exit* from the narrative, instead of remaining in the plot and seeking for resolutions."<sup>412</sup> Williams defends MacKinnon's exploration of the "pervasive ambiguities of choice and its effect," and argues that it does not mean that tragic theology is unable to encompass Christian hope.<sup>413</sup> Instead of a focus on teleological metanarratives, MacKinnon seeks to create a theology which dictates the need for meditation on the catastrophic results of human choice so that "we discover the nature of our human responsibility."<sup>414</sup>

In a similar vein to Milbank, Hart contends that tragic theology focusses too closely on unrelenting human suffering rather than the restorative hope that is provided through the life of Christ. Hart's suggestion is that tragic theology "turns attention not towards the one who suffers, but to the sublime background against which the drama is played out," due to the way that it universalises suffering and detracts from the individual experience of the one who

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<sup>410</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 109.

<sup>411</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 22.

<sup>412</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 21.

<sup>413</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 109.

<sup>414</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 109.

suffers.<sup>415</sup> The focus of tragic theology on the cross alone, Hart argues, engenders a denial of the victory of the Cross, and legitimises conflict and suffering as omnipresent in the human experience.<sup>416</sup> Hart's claim is that tragic theology ignores, what Williams terms, the "protest against suffering" that Christ represents.<sup>417</sup>

Milbank and Hart raise significant critiques of tragic theology which provide valuable insight into the dangers that an unchecked focus on tragedy may have. However, their criticisms rely on a form of tragic theology that views suffering as the inevitable outcome of human existence and freedom, a negativity that is not contained within MacKinnon's work. In defence of tragic theology, Williams states that the "tragic imagination would be incompatible with Christian narrative only if tragedy were a form of pessimism and our proper reaction a form of Stoicism, reconciliation with the unbearable as inevitable."<sup>418</sup> Tragic theology attempts to bridge the gap between an acknowledgement of future hope and the centrality of tragedy, like that which Eliot outlines, to human experience.

## 6.2 The Unintelligibility of Suffering

A consequence of the meaningless suffering in *The Waste Land* is the lack of meaningful revelation provided in response. The prophetic voices of the poem who answer the inhabitants' desire for meaning are impotent, and instead their offerings are unintelligible, or simply silent. The prophet Tiresias is emblematic of all of the seers of the poem and is characterised by Eliot as seeing the whole substance of the text. However, despite the knowledge that he has, Tiresias fails to give the characters of *The Waste Land* more than silence in answer to or warning about their suffering.<sup>419</sup> In his work in tragic theology, Williams identifies the necessity of wider

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<sup>415</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 386.

<sup>416</sup> Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 384.

<sup>417</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 110.

<sup>418</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 115.

<sup>419</sup> See section 3.1.

systems of meaning in order to discern tragedy. This form of faith system is not present in the world of *The Waste Land* and the resultant unintelligibility suggests that there can be no response to the search for meaning within suffering if there is no framework to respond within.

The self in a world without concrete meaning “would be a self whose needs were capable of being catalogued and managed, not a self in process of formation by the dissolving of images and the awakening of buried trauma: an *unthought* self.”<sup>420</sup> Within this ungrounded framework the self is one that is “seeking always an equilibrium of satisfaction for the moment.”<sup>421</sup> The fluidity of meaning occurs as a result of a worldview which claims the world is “masterable” and of human creation, not to be confused with the imperative of human agency in the work of tragedy.<sup>422</sup> Loss, in a world purely created by humanity, is not ultimate as that which is lost can be recovered through the same process by which it was initially created. If all things rely simply on humanity for their existence then they are not irreplaceable and any representation of tragedy ceases to function. The relationship between humanity and the wider cosmos is prioritised in tragic theology as it is the breakdown of this relationship that leads to tragedy.

Tragedy is not separate from Christian faith, and instead it is a faith system that allows tragedy to make sense instead of descending into absurdity. This argument is not exclusive to a Christian perspective. Secular theorists such as George Steiner claim the centrality of the sacred for comprehending tragedy. Steiner argues that European philosophical modernity has killed the possibility of constructing tragic drama by means of a naturalistic focus that strips the world of the meaning necessary for tragic imagination.<sup>423</sup> Without the grounding of an objective meaning system, Steiner believes that tragedy no longer functions, as “if we have no doctrine of what it might be to live *in* grace, no sense of an order that we have made

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<sup>420</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 101.

<sup>421</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 101.

<sup>422</sup> Waller, “Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon’s Use of Tragedy,” 106.

<sup>423</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 82.

inaccessible to ourselves, there is no irremediable loss and so no tragic vision.”<sup>424</sup> If there is no objective vision of belonging in life, then there can be no genuine understanding of loss. In his later work, Steiner expands on the “ontologically tragic” nature of humanity in the essential alienation that exists between humanity and the world.<sup>425</sup> True tragedy relies on the undergirding cosmology that Steiner identifies, without which suffering would be detached from human responsibility for problems that are incapable of resolution. The tragic is formed by alienation from structures that are best found within a framework provided by sacred forms. Steiner connects this alienation to a primordial homelessness that is linked to human agency in association with the sacred as a means of developing tragedy.<sup>426</sup>

Secular modernity, in Steiner’s view, not only removes the weight of human agency, but renders meaningless the language necessary for tragedy to function. The loss of the sacred in the world results in an environment where, in a way that resonates with Eliot’s claims for language’s futility in the face of suffering, “meanings are always difficult, because presence has evaporated; and so there will be no words for what we are *bound* to wrestle with.”<sup>427</sup> In order for a situation to be tragic it is necessary that loss can function in a genuine, irreplaceable way. A form of language that is negotiable allows for a value system that does not treat loss as ultimate; meaning becomes fluid and tragedy, therefore, can no longer function. Language may seem secondary to the experience of loss, however it is through language that experience is mediated and the description of tragedy is central to the experience itself. It is for this reason that tragic literature is able to make a significant contribution to tragic theology. In agreement with Steiner, this thesis holds that tragic representation relies on language within a concrete worldview to depict an intelligible image of loss and suffering.

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<sup>424</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 83.

<sup>425</sup> George Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered,” *New Literary History* 35 (2004): 1-15, 2.

<sup>426</sup> Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered,” 3.

<sup>427</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 84.



### 6.3 Apophaticism and Bafflement

Eliot's *Waste Land* opens horizons on the unintelligibility of meaningless suffering and any theological engagement must give account of the poem's refusal to make meaning of suffering in the waste land. Theological responses to tragic suffering need to take into account the loss of meaningful structures which uphold meaning making in suffering, and to ask what can be said in the face of such inevitable tragedy. In her recent works on suffering, Kilby outlines the necessary apophatic limitations for theological engagement with suffering; a theory of "something like apophasis" in the face of inexplicable suffering.<sup>428</sup> Theological reflections on human suffering raise important questions about God's passibility. Against passibilist accounts of suffering, Thomas Weinandy maintains the traditional position of divine impassibility.<sup>429</sup> Whilst agreeing with Weinandy's position of impassibility, Kilby criticises Weinandy's knowingness in regards to suffering.<sup>430</sup> The suffering that tragic theology captures is the unexplainable and meaningless experiences of human loss that defy response. Kilby's theory is based around the category of suffering more broadly and maintains the need to ensure that the tragic is not trivialised through a message of Christian hope that nullifies tragedy. While it may seem like this apophasis is a lack of response to suffering, Kilby's work, when partnered with Williams, explores a posture that does justice to the depth of despair like that expressed in *The Waste Land*.

The premise of Kilby's argument starts as a response to the theology of suffering that is laid out by Weinandy in his book *Does God Suffer?* In response to the trend of passibilism made popular in the decades following the holocaust, Weinandy offers an exposition of suffering to uphold God's impassibility and to offer suggestions for meaning-making about human suffering.<sup>431</sup> Proponents of divine passibilism, like Jürgen Moltmann and Paul Fiddes,

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<sup>428</sup> Karen Kilby, "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering," *Modern Theology* 36 (2020): 92-104, 92.

<sup>429</sup> Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2000), 2-6.

<sup>430</sup> Kilby, "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering," 93-4.

<sup>431</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 25.

respond to the question of suffering by offering a view of God who suffers alongside humanity. The passible God is open to, and impacted by, the suffering of created beings. Alternatively, Weinandy examines the meaning and human causes of suffering and offers a response that he deems appropriate for ensuring that the faith of the sufferer is encouraged and their focus is shifted towards God, but in a way that upholds the impassibility of God. Weinandy details four causes of suffering to which he responds, namely suffering caused by personal sin; groaning towards repentance; tests and trials of discipleship; and the sins of others.<sup>432</sup> For Kilby, Weinandy's accounts of the causation of suffering are too knowing; she states, "he writes as if he knows his way around this territory."<sup>433</sup> Such knowingness and meaning-making "sits very uncomfortably next to the recollection of genocide or mass torture and murder."<sup>434</sup> In many ways, Weinandy's suggestions for responses to suffering fail to address instances of true tragedy, the types of suffering that are ongoing and seemingly meaningless, due to his approach's unwillingness to allow for the inexplicability of meaningless suffering. In Weinandy's work, Kilby writes, "there is no attention to the limits of the applicability of the explanations of purpose and meaning that are set out."<sup>435</sup> There is a lack of intelligibility about suffering that Weinandy's work transgresses, and tragic suffering cannot be encapsulated within the four categories of suffering he offers. A different theological response is, therefore, required.

Kilby's proposal is that in the face of tragic suffering the necessary response is "something like apophasis," a type of "bafflement before suffering."<sup>436</sup> As an apophatic theologian, Kilby suggests that there are necessary limits to what theology may say about suffering. In Kilby's words, it is "because there is *not* always a tale of the experience of grace or growth or greater intimacy in suffering that the possibility of an 'apophatic' response to

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<sup>432</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 262.

<sup>433</sup> Kilby, "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering," 94.

<sup>434</sup> Kilby, "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering," 95.

<sup>435</sup> Kilby, "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering," 95.

<sup>436</sup> Kilby, "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering," 92.

suffering on the part of the one who suffers is important.”<sup>437</sup> There is an inability of theology to speak meaning into every form of suffering. In encountering another’s suffering there is “a need to attend, to take interest, to wish to understand, to understand as much as we can, *as well as* a necessary failure in this,” and the acknowledgement of that failure is a significant contribution.<sup>438</sup> “Bafflement” in the face of tragic suffering allows for a full recognition of the unspeakable elements of tragedy without the impetus to move on to a focus on future resolution.

In contrast to the works of MacKinnon and Williams, Kilby’s argument places emphasis on a vision of eschatological hope within a theology of suffering. It is necessary, from Kilby’s perspective, for Christian theology to uphold “a future-oriented eschatology, a real eschatological hope” so as not to “slide into a positive valuation of suffering.”<sup>439</sup> Kilby believes that without this future-oriented eschatology apophysis before suffering cannot be achieved.<sup>440</sup> When held alongside eschatological hope apophysis is a recognition of unknowing in the face of present suffering supported by the knowledge that in the future this suffering will be relieved. An important distinction is made here by Kilby who notes that “it is possible, and important, to distinguish between *being* reconciled, and hoping that there *will be* reconciliation.”<sup>441</sup> Kilby upholds the necessity of acknowledging eschatological hope, but she suggests that restraint in terms of the content of eschatology “prevents such moral trespass” of unqualified affirmations of meaning.<sup>442</sup> As apophaticism is a necessary response to suffering, Kilby argues that “we cannot aim, even provisionally, to fill out, to sketch in, the

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<sup>437</sup> Kilby, “Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering,” 97.

<sup>438</sup> Kilby, “Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering,” 100.

<sup>439</sup> Kilby, “Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering,” 104.

<sup>440</sup> Kilby, “Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering,” 104.

<sup>441</sup> Kilby, “Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering,” 104.

<sup>442</sup> Karen Kilby, “Eschatology, Suffering, and the Limits of Theology,” in *Game Over?: Reconsidering Eschatology*, eds. Christophe Chalamet et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 279-292, 290.

content of eschatological hope.”<sup>443</sup> A recognition of eschatological hope does not need to imply a shallow escapism which ignores the realities of tragic suffering within the human experience, rather it is a, not necessarily concrete, hope that at some point all things will be reconciled through the person of Christ.

However, the experience that Eliot describes in *The Waste Land* does not allow scope for this acknowledgement of eschatological hope due to the explicit depiction Eliot makes of the inability for hope to be found. Can there be an apophatic response to suffering as it is described by Eliot? Williams suggests that an image of eschatological hope “does not require us to suppose that suffering is cancelled or even compensated by the hope of ultimate reconciliation.”<sup>444</sup> Unlike Kilby, Williams and MacKinnon are both at pains to ensure that a vision of eschatological hope does not trump depictions of tragedy within human experience. In fact, Williams argues that it is in the recognition of tragedy that hope is able to be more fully realised. Williams claims that “the theological perspective affirms that fundamental reality and agency, divine truth itself, is torn apart in and by human history and yet brings itself together and is not destroyed.”<sup>445</sup> Here is the tension inherent within tragic theology. It is necessary for tragic theologians to hold the balance between an affirmation of mourning and the knowledge of some future resolution that does not overwhelm the reality of present suffering. Poetry like *The Waste Land* prioritises one side of this equation as a depiction of the genuine despair held by those in the midst of tragic suffering that seems both meaningless and devoid of future hope.

Perhaps there is an addition to the “bafflement” that Kilby suggests which better holds the tension between present tragedy and eschatological hope. Both Kilby and Williams identify the roles of silence and communication in the experience of tragic pain. There is a sense in which the silence that Kilby offers as a form of response creates a “speechless despair”

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<sup>443</sup> Kilby, “Eschatology, Suffering, and the Limits of Theology,” 291.

<sup>444</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 124.

<sup>445</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 124.

if it is not held in tension with the focus that Kilby places on eschatological hope.<sup>446</sup> Williams's argument is that when this bafflement moves to a place of description, as in tragic literature, it "confronts us with the intractable otherness of human others, and at the same time obliges us to recognize what it is that allows us to talk with and listen to them."<sup>447</sup> This calls for, in Williams's words "imagining a body whose wounds we both contemplate and recognize, the gravity of whose wounds we are forced to acknowledge."<sup>448</sup>

In the writing and experiencing of tragic literature the power of tragedy is able to be seen and to contribute to a holistic image of the human person. This argument is also present in Kilby's work, who uses Elaine Scarry's descriptions of physical pain as a parallel with experiences of tragedy to show that "developing the capacity to talk about and communicate to others the nature of pain is already to begin to diminish its 'aversive' quality."<sup>449</sup> The ability to speak the unspeakable through tragic literature gives the possibility of a step through apophasis. The meaning of tragedy is still unknowable, but the description of suffering contributes to a broader understanding of the human experience in a way that points towards Christian hope.

## 6.4 Conclusion

Tragic theology is a contested field that challenges a perceived tension between meaningless suffering, tragedy, and Christian eschatological hope. The tragic suffering that Eliot describes in *The Waste Land* explicitly challenges theological perspectives that would seek to ascribe meaning and value to pain. This chapter has argued, through the work of MacKinnon, that it is possible to develop a perspective on suffering that ascribes appropriate value to tragedy without also denying the possibility of future resolution. This argument calls for an acknowledgement of hope that does not nullify the present experience of suffering. Bafflement

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<sup>446</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 159.

<sup>447</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 159.

<sup>448</sup> Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 159.

<sup>449</sup> Kilby, "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering," 96.

before, and then retelling of, tragic suffering creates a shared human understanding of the extent to which tragedy can happen, and a mourning of this loss in a way that is neither diminished by or at the expense of eschatological hope.

## 7 Eschatology and Restoration

The final stanzas of T. S. Eliot's poem raise interpretive possibilities through the ambiguity of the ending, which opens horizons on suffering and hope and invites theological reflections on eschatology. *The Waste Land* ends with what Paul Fiddes terms a failure to reach closure, an openness to readings that prioritise either hope or despair.<sup>450</sup> The following chapter explores the ending of Eliot's text, which raises eschatological questions of death and cyclical renewal, in conversation with Fiddes's theological account of eschatological openness. The ambiguity of Eliot's ending, particularly in light of its earlier vision of death, invites an exploration of the nature and experience of death and its relation to the forms of meaning making within the poem. The poem concludes with the question of whether the land will be renewed to continue the cyclical pattern suggested by Eliot's use of fertility narratives. This chapter examines theologically the question of renewal in terms of Fiddes's account of eschatological and divine openness.

### 7.1 Literature and Eschatology

The relationship between literature and eschatology can be explored in terms of the nature of closure, or lack thereof, that is found in narratives. Fiddes argues that "all texts are eschatological, both in being open to the new meaning which is to come to them in the future, and also in being 'seriously open to the horizon which death gives to life.'"<sup>451</sup> Drawing from literary critic Northrop Frye and philosopher Paul Ricoeur, Fiddes argues that "texts are eschatological because they express possibilities rather than actualities; they describe not how things are, but how they *might be*."<sup>452</sup> This observation is particularly relevant with reference to the end of narratives which "both organizes the action and yet subverts its own closure in

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<sup>450</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 1.

<sup>451</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 6.

<sup>452</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 41.

deferring any final meaning.”<sup>453</sup> Authors are regularly making eschatological statements, claims about the nature of endings by the way they end their stories, regardless of whether this is their intention. The end of a narrative reflects the story that has come before in addition to presenting a vision of the end that is either closed or open. Fiddes identifies the depictions of closed and open endings as a structure that can help to raise theological questions of the eschaton and Christian visions of the end.

Within literature, the closedness or openness of endings refers to the question of narrative closure at the end of a text. Fiddes points specifically to examples within postmodernist texts in which the author provides multiple endings as an example of openness within the narrative’s “eschatology.” Fiddes uses these terms theologically to refer to questions of eschatological finality and continuity. Within eschatology, Fiddes argues, “there has to be a certainty about the overcoming of evil and the triumph of God’s purposes, but the freedom of God and the freedom of human beings to contribute to God’s project in creation also demands an openness in the future.”<sup>454</sup> The narrative of the human story is thus both open and closed in Fiddes’s account of the eschaton. It is imperative that this is not understood as a failure to reach closure as it might be within literature, rather it is an acknowledgement of the closure provided in some areas but the ongoing openness, the continuity of human experience, that occurs in others. The issues of closedness and openness are taken up in this chapter within theological discussions of death and renewal, respectively.

In the same way that the ending of the story shapes the narrative that has come before, Fiddes argues that eschatology is imperative in understanding the whole of Christian doctrine. Fiddes draws from Jürgen Moltmann who claims that eschatology is “the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day.”<sup>455</sup> In this sense, eschatology, as with endings in literature, has a role in the organisation of the action that has come before. An understanding of the end is

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<sup>453</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 59.

<sup>454</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 23.

<sup>455</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. J. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967), 15-6.



necessary for the whole to be best comprehended. Like Moltmann, Fiddes connects the need for a vision of ending to hope and states that “the Christian claim is that an ‘end’ which is characterized by both openness and closure” offers hope in the face of the end.<sup>456</sup> This end is “both certain and open, a fulfilment resisting closure,” as it captures the seriousness of death without undermining the ongoing nature of human existence caught up within the vision of Christian hope.<sup>457</sup> Fiddes argues, in the tradition of process theology, that in the eschaton “God makes room for the response and co-operation of the created world.”<sup>458</sup> This means to hold the tension between the finality of death, that which is closed as a result of it, and the openness within the eschaton for ongoing human flourishing. Within the eschaton, God’s being makes room for a human response and allows it to condition the “*content* of the end.”<sup>459</sup> Creation is taken up into God in the eschaton, outside the bounds of death, so that humanity continues to journey towards fulfilment. Insights from the way that endings function in literature indicate, for Fiddes, the way that an eschatological vision can be understood in terms of both openness and closedness in order that hope may be more clearly presented within Christian doctrine.

## 7.2 Cyclical Renewal and Eschatological Openness

One of the lingering questions at the end of *The Waste Land* concerns the nature of restoration and whether it can be achieved for the people that Eliot describes. A number of options are established by Eliot’s allusions in the poem, none more striking than that of the Fisher King narrative which posits that the relationship between the health of the individual and the health of the land is key to the renewal process. To create these connections Eliot draws on both the story of the Fisher King and traditional fertility myths that are visible in many cultures globally. These stories envision a world where the relationship between land and people is

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<sup>456</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 228.

<sup>457</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 180.

<sup>458</sup> Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 141.

<sup>459</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 141.

cyclically restored so that the ongoing health of both is ensured. It is a process that suggests a return rather than a progression and is visible particularly in indigenous cultures where the connection to land is central to the identity and health of the individual. However, the ending of the poem stresses, as explained by Fiddes, the lack of desire to continue within these patterns.<sup>460</sup> There is a tension between the idea of endings as cyclical and the linear view of history that sees a progression towards an eschatological vision of a new creation.

The connections that Eliot highlights between people and land are rarely considered within the theological tradition. Alternatively, indigenous theology makes connections between people and land in terms of restoration that echo the ideology of cyclical renewal that informs Eliot's use of the fertility myths. As an example, the relationship between land and people is viewed from a Māori perspective as central to the health of the individual.<sup>461</sup> There are parallels in this viewpoint with stories of the Fisher King in the way that the restoration of the land and that of the king are inextricably linked. Indigenous narratives that are more closely connected to land as well-being highlight the danger of alienation from the land for the health of communities and individuals. The restorative eschatological context that the final lines of Eliot's poem raises is drawn from the indigenous narratives that Frazer's anthropological work illustrates. While a wider discussion of these narratives is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is acknowledged that the connections made by indigenous theologians between people and land, often with a basis in biblical sources in addition to traditional beliefs, are relevant given Eliot's appropriation of indigenous narratives to buttress his work.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Paul Fiddes, "Versions of the Wasteland: The Sense of Ending in Theology and Literature in the Modern Period," in *Modernism, Christianity and Apocalypse*, eds. Eric Tønning, Matthew Feldman, and David Addyman (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 29-52, 42-3.

<sup>461</sup> Tui Cadigan, "Land Ideologies that Inform a Contextual Maori Theology of Land," *Ecotheology* 6 (2001): 123-137, 125; Māori Marsden, *The Woven Universe: Selected Writings of Rev. Māori Marsden*, ed. Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal (Otaki: Estate of Rev. Māori Marsden, 2003), 68.

<sup>462</sup> Mark Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 61.

In his discussion of eschatological time, Fiddes highlights the theological tension between cyclical and linear timelines with regards to the eschaton. He identifies the way that fertility rituals, like those Eliot utilises, use a form of “repetition in which there was ‘nothing new under the sun’” which elucidates “an archetypal moment in which there could be a deliverance from what seemed a meaningless progression from day to day.”<sup>463</sup> The cyclical nature of these narratives provides a rhythm for life in which decay and regeneration occur with a sense of regularity. However, an eschatological perspective on these narratives illustrates the sense of meaninglessness about cycles of events that Fiddes suggests is “difficult to distinguish from stasis.”<sup>464</sup> Eliot, too, grasps at this idea with the suggestion at the beginning of the poem that the ongoing renewal symbolised by Spring is in fact the “cruellest” thing that could occur.<sup>465</sup> Within the scope of eternity, the Jewish, and as follows Christian, tradition is to present “a linear view of history, with the arrow of time flying from first creation to new creation rather than looping back to a primordial paradise.”<sup>466</sup> Fiddes does not deny the place of cyclical rhythms within Jewish traditions, but highlights the forward facing *telos* of an eternal perspective.<sup>467</sup> Cyclical narratives that persist eternally are incapable of expressing the type of renewal and regeneration that is encapsulated by transformative Christian eschatological visions. Fiddes connects the idea of cyclical renewal with his view of eschatological openness, the ongoing development of the eschatological vision, that he parallels with his view of the openness of God.

### 7.3 *Perichoresis* and Divine Openness

The cyclical eschatological visions in nature find resonance, Fiddes argues, in social views of the Trinity. For Fiddes, openness within eschatology, that he links to cyclical rhythms in

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<sup>463</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 197.

<sup>464</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 202.

<sup>465</sup> See section 4.1.

<sup>466</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 197.

<sup>467</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 197.

nature, is directly associated with his view of the perichoretic nature of the Trinity. *Perichoresis*, in Fiddes's thought, "expresses the permeation of each [divine] person by the other, their coinherence without confusion," the openness of the divine persons to each other in ecstatic love.<sup>468</sup> Rather than identifying the persons of the Trinity according to their distinct *hypostases*, Fiddes focusses on the "mutual interpenetration" of the divine persons which accord them "mutual interiority" through their indwelling of one another.<sup>469</sup> Fiddes acknowledges the traditional language of *perichoresis* is not related to the verb *perichoreuo*, to dance around, yet he draws a connection between the two as it "does illustrate well the dynamic sense of perichoresis."<sup>470</sup> The correlation Fiddes draws between *perichoresis* and *perichoreuo* highlight his dynamic account of God's being. The Trinity is, in this sense, constituted as a dance, that enables Fiddes to "understand the divine persons as movements of relationship, rather than as individual subjects who *have* relationships."<sup>471</sup> The persons of the Trinity are more simply understood as relations rather than distinct persons, and as such Fiddes stresses the centrality of openness, relationality, and participation to God's being. As a consequence of this argument, Fiddes conceives of salvation as *theosis*, not in terms of the human person becoming divinised, but rather "being incorporated into the fellowship of the divine life."<sup>472</sup> The mutual coinherence of the perichoretic Trinity results in an eschatological vision of human incorporation into the divine dance.

Fiddes develops his account of *perichoresis* from his reading of the church fathers. Drawing from Gregory of Nazianzus and Maximus, Fiddes highlights the use of *perichoreo* in reference to the relationship between Christ's humanity and his divinity.<sup>473</sup> Both Gregory and Maximus use *perichoresis* to describe the "simultaneity of actions" that are both divine

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<sup>468</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 71.

<sup>469</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 47.

<sup>470</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 72.

<sup>471</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 72.

<sup>472</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 76.

<sup>473</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 73.

and human in the person and work of Christ.<sup>474</sup> However, Fiddes extends their conceptuality from the actions of one subject to the *perichoresis* of actions themselves. The connection between Fiddes's argument and the church fathers is particularly pronounced in relation to the issue of the *arche*, or source, of the persons. Instead of viewing the Father as the *arche* of the Trinity, Fiddes argues that "the interweaving relationships of Father, Son and Spirit are themselves the divine essence which is the source (*arche*) of the persons, in the sense that the persons are constituted by relations with each other."<sup>475</sup> Rather than an Eastern view of procession, Fiddes develops an image of *perichoresis* as a "'progressive' dance" in which the dance forms the relationships; "the dance goes out from the Father and back in again to the Father" resulting in "this mutual penetration."<sup>476</sup> The dance invites the participation of humanity in the divine life of God as the love of the Trinity goes out from itself to draw in human partners as "there cannot be a dance without human partners to be brought in."<sup>477</sup> Relations in the Trinity are continually opened by the Spirit to give "our relations a place in the movement of God's purposeful journey towards new creation."<sup>478</sup> The perichoretic interrelatedness of the Trinity as relations creates a divine openness that invites human participation in the eschatological work of God.

Fiddes's use of relations as the starting point for developing a trinitarian doctrine is the subject of critique. Paul Molnar claims that "no experience of relations can ever be the starting point for thinking truly about the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."<sup>479</sup> Instead, Molnar argues that theology must begin with a revelation from God himself.<sup>480</sup> The danger of Fiddes's focus on relations, Molnar argues, is the conflation of the relationships within the

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<sup>474</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 73.

<sup>475</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 77.

<sup>476</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 75.

<sup>477</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 78.

<sup>478</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 54.

<sup>479</sup> Paul D. Molnar, "Response to Paul S. Fiddes," in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. Jason S. Sexton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 191-196, 193.

<sup>480</sup> Molnar, "Response to Paul S. Fiddes," 193.

Trinity with humanity.<sup>481</sup> *Perichoresis*, in the views of Moltmann and Fiddes, omits the distinction between creator and creature; the conflation of the two does, Molnar argues, lead to a pantheistic conception of the divine life.<sup>482</sup> Likewise, Karen Kilby claims that the suggestion that the Trinity has a distinct and vibrant inner life, the perichoretic dance, can only be maintained through a projection of human understandings of relationship onto the divine.<sup>483</sup> This is a form of projectionism that is “built into the kind of project that most social theorists are involved in.”<sup>484</sup> In order to make social trinitarian claims, personal and societal ideals must be projected onto a vision of the Trinity.<sup>485</sup> Whilst Moltmann insists that “the doctrine of the perichoresis links together in a brilliant way the threeness and the unity, without reducing the threeness to the unity, or dissolving the unity into the threeness.”<sup>486</sup> Kilby, however, argues that such social trinitarianism is a double projection: projecting the most pleasing aspects of human togetherness on to God and then offering them back as a healing remedy to humanity.<sup>487</sup> A doctrine of *perichoresis* that is formed through projection leads to the highest of human ideals being projected onto God’s being and reflected back to elucidate human experience.

Fiddes’s connection between *perichoresis* and eschatology, while contentious, is interesting to consider with regard to the theological horizons offered by Eliot’s allusions to cyclical narratives in nature.<sup>488</sup> Fiddes points to Moltmann’s eschatology which frames participation in the eternal life of God by how human persons are “drawn into the circular

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<sup>481</sup> Molnar, “Response to Paul S. Fiddes,” 196.

<sup>482</sup> Molnar, “Response to Paul S. Fiddes,” 196.

<sup>483</sup> Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000): 432-445, 439.

<sup>484</sup> Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection,” 441.

<sup>485</sup> Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection,” 441.

<sup>486</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1981), 175.

<sup>487</sup> Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection,” 441.

<sup>488</sup> Paul Fiddes, “Relational Trinity: Radical Perspective,” in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. Jason S. Sexton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 159-185, 163.

movement of the divine relationships.”<sup>489</sup> It is important to note that Fiddes does not use this identification of cyclical rhythms as analogous of the trinitarian relationship, but instead states that “we might understand our experiences of cyclical rhythms as a pale shadow of divine *perichoresis*.”<sup>490</sup> Fiddes argues that nature’s seasonal rhythms partially reflect the movement of the perichoretic Trinity that humanity is drawn into as part of the new creation. He states that “our experience of circular rhythms in our present time-frame points us towards the inter-weaving and mutually indwelling movements of love in God.”<sup>491</sup> In this sense, the human participation in the trinitarian relationship is exemplary of the openness of the eschaton, and the continuation of the sort of circularity that is visible within the created order. Human inclusion in the openness of the trinitarian relationship contributes to the openness of the eschaton which Fiddes argues is reliant on human participation, and the continuation of the sort of circularity that is visible within the created order. For Fiddes, a vision of human participation in the eschatological work of God is captured by the connection between natural cyclical rhythms and a perichoretic view of the Trinity.

In relation to an eschatological view, *perichoresis* offers a vision of participation that can both take seriously the finality of death and highlight the ongoing role of humanity in God’s work. Cyclical rhythms of nature are a symbol of the “‘cosmic liturgy’ of the new creation” and Fiddes’s image of the openness of the Trinity’s “mutually indwelling movements” invites the affirmation of the participation of creatures in God’s eternal work.<sup>492</sup> Both Moltmann and Fiddes envision the perichoretic relationship as a dance to stress the dynamic inter-weaving of the relationships. Unlike the cyclical rhythms in nature, in the perichoretic dance the persons of the Trinity are constantly moving in and through each other. This dance is open and draws in human participants, as the Trinity is not known by observation but participation. In this open vision of God and of the eschaton the human person is invited

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<sup>489</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1992), 305.

<sup>490</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 204.

<sup>491</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 204.

<sup>492</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 204-5.

in “to experience the successiveness of past, present and future in a new harmony ... not in ‘simultaneity’ but as a rhythm.”<sup>493</sup> The human experience of time in life is necessarily split between the circularity of natural rhythms and the ongoing linear momentum of history. Fiddes’s vision encompasses both of these experiences through the incorporation of humanity into the circular movements of the perichoretic Trinity who engages with the ongoing restoration of the world in the eschaton.

#### 7.4 Asserting the Finality of Death

The whole of Eliot’s poem, and particularly the final stanzas, demand that the nature of death is taken seriously. There is a sense that death in the poem is not final and that the poem exists in a sort of purgatory of living death, however, Eliot does not expound a restorative vision to offer respite from this idea of death. Within the realm of literature, death often has a subversive role at the end of a story as it both organises what has come before and displaces the narrative arc by drawing it to an abrupt end that cannot be resolved.<sup>494</sup> Eliot’s misuse of death, its lack of finality, and the ambiguity of the ending of his poem calls into question the role of death and raises issues of finality that are central to an eschatological account of a theology of death.

In his discussion of death, Fiddes argues that the finality of death is related to a Hebrew understanding of psychosomatic unity.<sup>495</sup> This understanding is of “the human being as a body *animated* by ‘life’ or ‘breath’ rather than the Greek view of a *soul imprisoned* within a body.”<sup>496</sup> Holding to the Hellenism thesis, which posits a dichotomy between Greek and Hebrew perspectives, Fiddes draws from Oscar Cullmann’s work that highlights the difference between the deaths of Socrates and Jesus. While Socrates goes into a Greek vision of

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<sup>493</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 206.

<sup>494</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 59.

<sup>495</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 67.

<sup>496</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 67.



immortality with a swan-song, Jesus experiences death with a cry.<sup>497</sup> In Fiddes's account of Jewish thought, death is not a concept that can be escaped or bypassed to reach eternal life, rather it is conquered through resurrection.<sup>498</sup> In his assertion of the certainty of death Fiddes acknowledges the sense of ambiguity that death holds in that it carries a positive outcome. Like the ending of a story, death contains and orders that which has come before, and gives meaning to life due to its limitation. Fiddes argues that it is necessary "that in developing any doctrine of life beyond death we do not lose this finality."<sup>499</sup> Death creates a boundary that functions like the ending of a text as an organiser of what has come before and, as such, an insistence on death's finality ensures this relationship between the story and the ending are upheld. Ambiguous endings of stories, like that of *The Waste Land*, resist closure in the same way that an open view of death does.

The development of Fiddes's theology of death relies on the work of Karl Rahner and Moltmann to argue that death is a natural boundary in God's purpose for the maturing of humanity. However, this does not function to remove the sense of tragedy death engenders. Rahner delineates a separation between the concept of death and the individual experience of it. He states that "the death which is actually experienced by all men individually cannot be identified in some naïve and unreflective manner with that natural experience of death."<sup>500</sup> Through Rahner's work, Fiddes argues that "while death in the abstract may be regarded as a natural end to life, the *actual* death we experience is a mixture in varying proportions of natural limit and hostile force."<sup>501</sup> Fiddes holds that death is a necessary boundary, "a good thing spoilt" by the sin that results in human life ending before its purpose is fulfilled.<sup>502</sup> Similarly, Moltmann holds that the ambiguity of death is a necessary part of human life in contrast with

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<sup>497</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), 23-7.

<sup>498</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 233-4.

<sup>499</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 71.

<sup>500</sup> Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, trans. C. Henkey (London: Burns & Oates, 1961), 45.

<sup>501</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 69.

<sup>502</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 234.

the feeling of sorrow and suffering that protests against loss, a protest that Moltmann argues is shared by God.<sup>503</sup> From the perspective of this theology of death, death is an unavoidable and necessary part of human existence which does not exist outside of God's creation as a punishment for sin.<sup>504</sup>

While death in this view is seen as a natural aspect of life within God's creation, this does not mean that its position is unaffected by sin. The introduction of sin in combination with death means, in Fiddes's judgement, that "death *as we know it* has been marked by sinfulness, that is a slipping of human life away from the purpose of God towards non-being."<sup>505</sup> Death, within Fiddes's account, is non-being; an "annihilating Nothingness" which Jesus confronts as 'other' in his experience of death.<sup>506</sup> The act of death is understood, therefore, as a "struggle between possibility and nothingness, or between being and non-being."<sup>507</sup> Drawing from Eberhard Jüngel, Fiddes maintains that God exists in this struggle through the participation of Jesus in a human death; "above all God does this in the death of Jesus, choosing to be defined as God in a dead man."<sup>508</sup> Fiddes claims that "God is not dead to our world because he participates in the death of our world," and that Christ's death did not occur only in his human nature, but in the fullness of his human and divine being.<sup>509</sup> To describe the death of God is to "speak of his exposure to the negation we feel in the experience of 'perishing'," and to hold that God sympathises with the experience of humanity through the experience of Jesus who endured the fullness of death.<sup>510</sup> Death is an experience of non-

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<sup>503</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974), 252-3.

<sup>504</sup> Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 223.

<sup>505</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 69.

<sup>506</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 236.

<sup>507</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 240.

<sup>508</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 240, 241.

<sup>509</sup> Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 191, 193.

<sup>510</sup> Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 200.

being, nothingness, that is understood and experienced by God as a part of the openness of God's self to humanity.

While Fiddes maintains that death would have occurred regardless of the existence of sin in humanity, it is "an enemy to life."<sup>511</sup> Death creates the frame that challenges the ability of humanity to reach the authentic ideal of human relationship through love.<sup>512</sup> The boundary to human life that death creates results in the experience of death as a hostile force that is a barrier to a sort of selfhood that is realised through genuine relationship with other humans and God.<sup>513</sup> However, this boundary is not final, and through the inclusion of humanity into God's self in the eschaton, the human person experiences ongoing formation. Judith Wolfe elucidates Fiddes's claim that "wholeness must ultimately be deferred to the eschaton: to that fullness of time when one's relationships to God and others are no longer curtailed by sin and death."<sup>514</sup> In her discussion of eschatology, Wolfe uses both Martin Heidegger and Fiddes to show that "we can apprehend in the fragmentary conditions of this life an ideal towards which humans strive, but whose attainment is impossible within this life."<sup>515</sup>

The framework of the Jewish understanding of the finality of death establishes the view that resurrection is central to the ongoing human experience of the eschaton. Fiddes contrasts this Jewish view with a Greek view of life after death where the body is gone and the soul's existence is ongoing, and argues that the Christian understanding must assert a juncture between the two states. Death, Fiddes states, "even if unmarked by sin, does not appear as God's last word on human personal existence."<sup>516</sup> Justification for believers is found after the encounter with "the nothingness revealed in the death of Christ and they trust in the

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<sup>511</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 233.

<sup>512</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 234.

<sup>513</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 234.

<sup>514</sup> Judith Wolfe, "Eschatology and Human Knowledge of God," in *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes*, eds. Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 157-169, 159.

<sup>515</sup> Wolfe, "Eschatology and Human Knowledge of God," 160.

<sup>516</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 70.

promise of the resurrection that God will bring new possibilities to the world from beyond it.”<sup>517</sup> In a similar way, Eliot describes a type of death that has real impacts on human life, and depicts a state of lifelessness where death is anticipated. However, in contrast to Fiddes’s vision of an ongoing human journey to fulfilment within the divine purpose of the eschaton, Eliot’s poem does not seem to suggest a hope of restoration. Parts of the poem allude to Dante’s *Inferno* and the hellish landscape which souls encounter in a form of purgatory. The final stanzas of the poem particularly reflect the sense of waiting and ambiguity that is tied up in the poem’s vision of death. Without an assertion of the finality of death, and the organising work this ending would provide, the characters of Eliot’s world are abandoned to a meaningless existence. A doctrine of the finality of death shapes the meaning of human life and it also allows for the creation of a meaningful eschatology that addresses the ongoing formation of humanity through resurrection.

## 7.5 Ongoing Eschatological Fulfilment

The linear experience of eschatological time is intrinsically linked to an assertion of death’s finality and the power of the resurrection. The purpose of a vision of the eschaton is not to recreate an ideal that has passed, but rather to ground a vision of hope in the future flourishing of humanity. Moltmann describes the resurrection as a “promise event” in which Christ’s *paraousia* is revealed in anticipation of its fulfilment.<sup>518</sup> Consideration of the eschaton requires an anticipation of the promise that the eschaton will bring the fullness of human participation in the ongoing work of God. The ongoing nature of this process, through the openness of God, is integral in order to uphold the openness, non-determinedness, of the eschatological vision. If what follows the finality of death is a resurrection into the stasis of cyclical rhythms, then the eschatological vision is, in fact, closed rather than open to human participation. The danger of Fiddes’s view of human incorporation into the perichoretic life

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<sup>517</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 73.

<sup>518</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 77-89.

of the Trinity is the suggestion that God's being is conditioned by the participation of humanity. Human incorporation into the perichoretic life of the Trinity allows the inclusion of created beings into the divine life and opens the way for human contribution to the formation of the new heavens and new earth.

One way to frame the participation narrative of eschatology is in terms of God's relationship to both possibility and actuality. Jüngel, whose work Fiddes often refers to, discusses the nature of possibility and actuality in relation to a doctrine of justification. Actuality, for Jüngel, is the instance of that which presently is, which invokes a dispute with regards to the metaphysical claim that this statement presupposes.<sup>519</sup> As an alternative to the metaphysical presumption of actuality's ontological primacy, Jüngel posits "a theological dismantling of the primacy of actuality as conceived by Aristotle."<sup>520</sup> Actuality is therefore conceived of as the tension between the actual and the not-yet-actual, and the hope of the future is in God's love which "concerns the being which is in becoming."<sup>521</sup> Jüngel argues that the essence of both possibility and actuality are "such that that which God's free love makes possible has ontological prevalence over that which God's omnipotence makes actual through our acts."<sup>522</sup> Possibility is prioritised over actuality in this perspective, in contrast to an Aristotelean worldview, as the formation of Christian hope in light of God's love. Jüngel claims that future hope is not simply the "not-yet-actual" but is testament to the possibilities that God holds within God's own self and are opened for created beings within the eschaton.

Fiddes argues that the distinction between possibility and actuality in eschatology relies on human participation in the work of God. The interdependence between humanity and God to enact possibilities is central to the argument of human participation in the divine that is raised by process philosophers and theologians. A. N. Whitehead claims that within the

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<sup>519</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, "The World as Possibility and Actuality," in *Theological Essays*, ed. J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 97.

<sup>520</sup> Jüngel, "The World as Possibility and Actuality," 103.

<sup>521</sup> Jüngel, "The World as Possibility and Actuality," 116.

<sup>522</sup> Jüngel, "The World as Possibility and Actuality," 116.

Godself there is the extent of possibilities that can be actualised, but these, Fiddes notes, only emerge out of “the *interaction between the creator and the created*.”<sup>523</sup> The vision of the eschaton is therefore one that is shaped by both humanity and God, and, in Fiddes’s work, emerges from his perichoretic account of human participation in God. Wolfe likewise asserts that the ongoing fulfilment of humanity and the future world are “orientated towards a future shaped both by God’s inalienable promise and by the irreducible free will of human beings.”<sup>524</sup> This is a vision of “cocreativity” that suggests that the openness of the eschaton is found in the promise of God that the possibilities are not-yet actualities, but rely on human freedom to choose and explore the divine possibility.<sup>525</sup> The eschatology that is shaped by these thinkers is an end that is open and involves continual development and fulfilment, rather than a future that is wholly determined.<sup>526</sup>

In the eschatological view of process theology, God bears, “transmutes or sums up” the total of human experiences, and this opens God up to a form of tragedy.<sup>527</sup> Fiddes notes that this “possible tragedy lies not in the presence of evil within God, but the absence of some good that the world might have produced.”<sup>528</sup> There is a “tragic beauty,” in Whitehead’s language, in the unfulfilled potentialities that God bears.<sup>529</sup> Humanity’s role in shaping the eschaton, and God’s possession of all possibility, leads to God holding possibilities that are never actualised. This experience of “tragic beauty,” Fiddes argues, results in a “blend of triumph and tragedy in God in his experience of suffering, as we can also think of a future which is certain and yet also unknown.”<sup>530</sup> For the sake of the openness of human participation

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<sup>523</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 170.

<sup>524</sup> Wolfe, “Eschatology and Human Knowledge of God,” 157.

<sup>525</sup> Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 40.

<sup>526</sup> Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 106.

<sup>527</sup> Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 106.

<sup>528</sup> Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 106.

<sup>529</sup> A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (London: Pelican Books, 1942), 340.

<sup>530</sup> Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 106.

in the eschaton, God must also bear the unfulfilled potentialities that result from human agency.

Critiques of the eschatological accounts developed by process theology focus on the perception that this doctrine implies God's reliance on God's creation in order for the eschaton to reach fulfilment. God consequently has a relationship of mutual interdependence on creation in the form of panentheism, rather than being a solely sufficient creator. Thomas Weinandy charges Fiddes's process theology as a panentheism that develops into a form of pantheism wherein God is not only reliant on the created order but the created order assumes a level of power that is rightfully held by God due to the cocreativity that leads to actuality.<sup>531</sup> In defence against these critiques Fiddes argues that "a God who depends upon nothing outside God's own self for existence ... may still, out of pure free will, become dependent upon others for enrichment of the divine life."<sup>532</sup> Fiddes's panentheism is a choice of the divine being to become open and to allow for human agency and interdependence to impact the Godself.<sup>533</sup> Process theology challenges the image of a creator from whom all of existence is already determined and instead suggests the idea of a God who is vulnerable and open to creation. This vulnerability is the source of critiques due to the challenge it poses to the doctrine of an impassible creator; if the future is determined through participation with humanity then God is impacted by the free will of that which God creates.

## 7.6 Conclusion

The narrative that Fiddes develops around possibility over actuality justifies an emphasis on the finality of death which leads to resurrection. The Christian hope in the promise of God's possibilities is found in the future rather than in a desire to return to a past wholeness. As Fiddes states, "true Christian desire is rooted not in lack and retrospection, but in hope for a

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<sup>531</sup> Thomas Weinandy, review of *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, by Paul Fiddes, *New Blackfriars* 82 (2001): 150-152, 152.

<sup>532</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 174.

<sup>533</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 174.

future which is anticipated in the present.”<sup>534</sup> Fiddes’s work presents an eschatological vision that holds the tension between that which is closed in death and the things that are open and ongoing in the eschaton. The image of nature’s cyclical rhythms that Eliot draws on are disrupted by the finality of death which provides a closure and an organising boundary for human life.<sup>535</sup> However, for Fiddes, the openness of the eschaton is found in participatory restoration enacted through God’s invitation to humanity into the perichoretic dance of the Trinity. Rather than a vision of a static circularity, like nature’s rhythms, this eschatological vision is one that provides the ongoing fulfilment of humanity through the enactment of God’s possibilities with human choice. Thus, the lingering question of *The Waste Land*’s desire for restoration is replaced by the finality of death so that, in Fiddes’s account, restoration can be enacted within the openness of the eschaton.

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<sup>534</sup> Fiddes, *The Promised End*, 221.

<sup>535</sup> Fiddes, “Versions of the Wasteland,” 43.



## 8 Conclusion

This thesis has utilised the method of juxtaposition for reading literature and theology to provide a reading of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* that opens horizons on human experience in order to invite theological reflection. This account of Eliot's poem primarily focusses on the image of living death that Eliot develops through a description of the unintelligibility of tragedy. Such unintelligibility is evinced through the impotence of the poem's prophetic voices and the fragmentation of the self. As a consequence of the state of living death, the poem raises the question of the possibility of restoration in the face of tragedy. Theologically, these issues open horizons in the areas of devotedness and desire, tragedy, and visions of eschatological hope. Each of these areas has been discussed with a focus in a particular scholar's work – Sarah Coakley's discourse on desire, Donald MacKinnon's contributions to the field of tragic theology, and Paul Fiddes's eschatological visions – as well as various other voices that help to form a constructive theological account in conversation with Eliot's poem's descriptions of human experience. This thesis shows the profitability of Fiddes's method of juxtaposition and the value of a careful reading of literature in conversation with theology.

The significance of the practice of reading literature and theology is in the way that it opens the interpretive horizons for both disciplines. As this thesis has shown, the study of Eliot's poem, through the method of juxtaposition, provides an image of human experience that enriches theological discussion and invites more substantial accounts of theology and human experience. The perspective gained through this understanding of human experience can aid in tempering theological concepts and earthing theological reflection in realities. The danger of this type of study is that either discipline could become privileged over the other in a way that undermines the legitimacy of the other's assertions. However, the method of juxtaposition used by this thesis helps to guard against this danger by ensuring the ethical standards of the literary discipline are upheld through the exegetical reading of the text. The

study of literature and theology is invaluable in creating a theological landscape that engages with the mediating contribution of representations of human experience.

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